An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of Education
and Youth

SNA Workforce Development Plan

June 2026

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Foreword from
Hildegarde Naughton TD
Minister for Education and Youth

I am pleased to introduce the first *Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Workforce Development Plan*, which sets out a strategic framework to strengthen, support and further develop the SNA workforce within our inclusive education system. This plan reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring that every child and young person is supported to reach their full potential.

SNAs play a vital role in enabling the inclusion, participation and wellbeing of children and young people with additional educational needs.

As the workforce has grown to almost to 25,000, so too has the importance of ensuring that SNAs are supported through clear role definition, professional development opportunities and pathways for career progression.

A key strength of this plan is that it has been shaped through extensive consultation and co-design. The voices of SNAs and their representative bodies have been central throughout the progress.

More than 13,000 SNAs participated in the first national survey of the profession, complemented by focus groups involving SHAs, school leaders and teachers, as well as consultations with children and young people. This collaborative approach has ensured that the Plan is grounded in the lived experience and expertise of those working in the role every day.

The plan sets out a clear vision for a dynamic and professional SNA workforce that is valued and supported within inclusive school communities. It provides a framework for the continued professionalisation of the role, while promoting strong collaborative relationships between SNAs, teachers, school leaders and families.

This Workforce Development Plan marks an important step forward in recognising and supporting the contribution of SNAs. It will provide greater clarity and consistency for schools and staff, while ensuring that the SNA service continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of children and young people.

I would like to sincerely thank all those who contributed to the development of this plan, particularly the SNAs and their representative organisations whose insights and expertise helped shape its direction. I also wish to acknowledge the work of the Steering Group, stakeholder representatives, school communities, parents, teachers and children and young people whose contributions have been invaluable.

I look forward to supporting the implementation of this plan in the years ahead and to continuing to strengthen the SNA workforce for the benefit of the children and young people they support.

1 Programme for Government 2025. Securing Ireland's Future.
2 Education Plan 2025.

This Workforce Development Plan represents a significant step toward embedding a more consistent, high quality support approach in supporting the SNA workforce. It ensures that their contributions are formally acknowledged within a comprehensive policy framework. This Plan also brings clarity and direction to the SNA service into the future and ensures it can address the changing and emerging needs of the students in a robust and flexible way.

Implementation of this Plan will contribute to improved outcomes for all children and young people in our schools, enhanced employment stability within the SNA workforce, clarity for school leaders and the whole school community, and a greater consistency in practices across schools. In particular, the new circular on the role of the SNA and the SNA Redeployment Scheme will, I expect, have a positive impact on the SNA workforce and the children and young people they support.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all those who have inputted into the development of this Plan. I would particularly like to thank the members of the Steering Group, who oversaw its preparation. The members of all Stakeholder Groups, who provided invaluable sectoral knowledge and the members of the Working Groups, which worked intensively during the collaborative phase of preparation to produce a series of comprehensive and carefully considered proposals. It is heartening to see school management bodies and trade unions coming together to deliver for children and young people with additional educational needs.

I would like to thank the many people who contributed to the consultation; children and young people, SNAs, parents, school leaders and teachers, it was invaluable to have the benefit of your informed views as we prepared the Plan.

I look forward to continuing to support their professional development over the coming years as we enter the implementation phase of the Plan.

Foreword from
Michael Moynihan TD

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion.

As Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion, I welcome the publication of the *Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan*. Through the implementation of the measures set out in this plan, we will strengthen the capacity of our education system to support students with additional needs.

SNAs play such an important role in our schools and can be a key part of a child's access to their education. I have met many SNAs during visits to schools across the country and know the great work they do to support children with additional needs. They are a vital part of our school communities, playing a key role in supporting students to engage in education fully and to experience a positive and inclusive school environment.

The development of this plan represents an important step in setting out how SNAs will be supported into the future, including through enhanced professional development, clearer role structures, and improved workforce supports.

By strengthening the SNA workforce, we are reinforcing our commitments to ensuring that children and young people with additional needs are afforded equitable opportunities to participate fully in education.

In partnership with stakeholders across the education sector, we are committed to delivering actions set out in this plan. This will support continued progress towards an inclusive education system where all children and young people are supported to reach their full potential, regardless of their needs or circumstances.

As a part of this ongoing work, the Department of Education & Youth will continue to ensure that policies and supports relating to the SNA workforce evolve in line with system needs, informed by evidence, and a commitment to continues improvement.

I look forward to working with Minister Naughton, department officials and all the education partners to deliver the strategic actions outlined in this Plan.

Foreword from Bernie McNally

Secretary General of the Department of Education and Youth

I am very pleased to present the *Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan* which sets out the department's strategic objectives and actions for the development of our much valued SNA workforce.

The Department of Education and Youth remains committed to the delivery of high - quality education and youth services through the professionalism, dedication, and expertise of all staff who work in the sector.

I want to acknowledge the ongoing commitment and professionalism of SNAs and the increasingly important role they play as part of the education workforce. SNAs perform an essential role in supporting students with additional needs to access and participate fully in primary and post-primary school.

In developing this plan for SNAs, the department engaged with children and young people, placing them at the centre of this important policy development about a service that has significant impact for them. Effective engagement, consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders was a cornerstone of the process. I want to take this opportunity to thank children and young people for their contributions. Their willingness to share their views and experience was greatly appreciated and their insights proved extremely useful in shaping the policy.

This Plan establishes a more consistent approach to workforce development, supporting capacity building, role clarity and workforce sustainability.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the team in the department and all our education partners involved in the development and delivery of the first SNA workforce plan for their time, commitment, professionalism and dedication across the process. The actions set out in this plan will enable us deliver initially on priority areas, addressing key challenges, while also laying the groundwork for long term reform and delivery of new initiatives. Through implementation of this plan, we will continue to strengthen the supports available within schools that address the diverse and evolving needs of children and young people across the education and youth services sector.

I want to to thank all the SNAs who contributed to this plan. I look forward to continued co-operation and progress with them and with the wider stakeholders to expand on the work carried out to date, and to deliver on the recommendations of this report.

Chapter 1
Terminology and Language

1.1 Language

The Department of Education and Youth acknowledges that language is continually evolving. For this reason, the department regularly engages with parents, students and other key stakeholders such as the National Disability Authority (NDA), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on the use of disability language and terminology.

Some widely used terms, such as 'special education' are enshrined in the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (the EPSEN Act)[3].

1.2 The EPSEN Act Review

The EPSEN Act 2004 set out a detailed statutory framework for the provision of education for those with additional educational needs; however, some sections of this act remain uncommenced. Consequently, the EPSEN Act underwent a comprehensive review with the subsequent report published in June 2025.[4] Part of the review considered the language used when referring to people with special educational needs, and its impact and future use in legislation. This is an important consideration to ensure that the terms used in law and policy are appropriate and respectful, aligning with modern understanding and best practice. It also reflects a growing awareness of people-first language (emphasising the person before the disability) and the importance of inclusive terminology.

The report also recommends that terminology used in education policy and practice should be clear and, where possible, based on evidence and best practice. This includes reviewing the title of the NCSE and considering whether it would be preferable to use the term "additional needs" instead of "special needs".

The feedback from the review did not reflect a major consensus on preferred terminology. Participants across all stakeholder groups selected 'additional educational needs' as their preferred alternative to the term 'special educational needs' used in the EPSEN Act. However, students were the least likely to choose this option, not because they preferred another term but because most stated "It doesn't matter much to me". Participants also noted that virtually all terms used to describe additional needs could be weaponised against children and young people.

3 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004.

4 Report_on_the_Review_of_Education_for_Persons_with_Special_Educational_Needs_EPSEN_Act.pdf

1.3 Special Educational Needs

The EPSEN Act 2004 defines 'special educational needs' in relation to a person as:

> *A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.*[5]

As part of the EPSEN review, the department used various engagement and consultation methods to ensure a thorough and inclusive process. In their survey with parents and professionals, they were provided with a summary of the definition of special educational needs as set out in the act and asked to indicate to what extent the definition 'adequately defines' an educational need. The majority of parents and professionals agreed or strongly agreed with this definition.

Students appeared least concerned about terminology and believed that any term could become derogatory. They felt that the attitude behind the words rather than the terms themselves was the most important element in creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment. This was also noted by SNAs during focus groups during the research phase for the SNA Workforce Development Plan (the Plan).

The working group on the review and development of the SNA role (Pillar 1 of this Plan) agreed that maintaining a focus on inclusivity while avoiding language that leads to the "othering" of roles or students is critical.

Given the feedback from stakeholders in the EPSEN review and the consensus from the Working Groups, the term "special educational needs", as defined in the EPSEN Act, and currently used in legislation and policy by the department, has been retained in this document and throughout the work on the Plan for clarity and consistency.

1.4 Special Needs Assistant (SNA)

In relation to the title of special needs assistant (SNA), it was acknowledged during research on the Plan that some schools use alternative titles such as 'inclusion support assistant' or 'additional needs assistant' for SNAs working in their schools.

The Working Group under Pillar 1 of the Plan agreed that . an official change in title would not make any difference to the students' perspective of the role and their relationship with the SNA. The consensus from the working group was that the SNA title remains widely recognised and embedded in policy and practice, including in the term special education teachers and subject to any changes arising from the recommendations from the EPSEN Review, a change from the current title, is not merited.

Accordingly, the term 'special needs assistant' or 'SNA' has been used throughout this report and in the development of the Plan to maintain consistency and clarity, and to align with existing provisions and associated legislation.

5 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, Section 1.

1.5 SNA Title In Schools

In the research conducted with children and young people in schools, there was discussion on how in certain schools, SNAs are referred to as Mr., Ms or Mrs., while in other schools they are addressed by their first name. Most participants expressed a preference for the more informal approach of calling the SNAs by their first name.

Feedback from focus groups also reflected the different practices in schools where formal titles are used for teaching staff whereas an SNA in same room may be known by their first name. Many of the SNA participants signified that they had no concerns around being called by their first names. They agreed that whatever title is used, a consistent approach should be taken in schools with a view to promoting equality and respect.

1.6 SNA Scheme

Focus groups with SNAs conducted in preparation for the Plan highlighted the use of the term 'SNA scheme' in circulars and policy as a matter of concern, where many feel it is indicative of a transient workforce and not reflective of a professional workforce. The associated report contains a recommendation to discontinue the use of the word "scheme". The feedback from SNAs in particular indicates that the preferred term, reflecting the integral role SNAs play in school communities, is SNA workforce or SNA service.

1.7 Student Support Plan

The EPSEN review found that revised legislation should use the term student support plans (SSPs) instead of individual education plans (IEPs) as the basis for providing supports and resources, including the right to appeal. SSP is the term used widely in departmental policy and NCSE guidance. Accordingly the term 'student support plan' has been used in this document and during the development of the Plan to ensure consistency.

1.8 Core Care Needs and Student Support Duties

Circular 0030/2014 outlined the purpose of the SNA role to provide support for students with significant additional care needs. This circular outlined examples of primary care needs which would be considered significant and which may require SNA support. This circular also described additional tasks which were classified as secondary care associated tasks which SNAs will also perform, but which would not in themselves constitute a reason for the allocation of SNA support.

This terminology from Circular 0030/2014 has been updated in Circular 32/2026 to core care need and student support duties to more accurately reflect the nature of the work undertaken. These terms are defined and set out in the new circular to replace circular 0030/2014 and circular 0071/2011. Consequently, the terms core care needs and student support duties are used throughout this document to reflect these duties as set out in circular 0032/2026.

1.9 Acronyms / Definitions

ATU	Atlantic Technological University
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CYP	child/children and young person/people
CHI	Childrens Health Ireland
DCED	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
Delegate	Refers to a person designated by the board or school principal, to act on their behalf, including the deputy principal and teachers.
DEY / the department	Department of Education and Youth
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ESC	Education Support Centre
GNVB	Garda National Vetting Bureau
HSE	Health Service Executive
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Parent	Reference to parent in the Plan includes a foster parent, a guardian appointed under the Guardianship of Children Acts, 1964 to 1997, or other person acting in loco parentis who has a child in his or her care subject to any statutory power or order of a court and, in the case of a child who has been adopted means the adopter or adopters or the surviving adopter.
PATD	Professional Award-Type Descriptors
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SNA	Special needs assistant
SNAWDU	SNA Workforce Development Unit
SoS	Statement of Strategy

Student	a child or young person enrolled in a recognised school.
SSP	Student support plan is the individualised learning and care plan for students.
Teacher	means a qualified professional registered with the Teaching Council, who under the direction of the principal, facilitates learning and personal development of students in recognised primary, special and post-primary schools, as provided for in the Education Act. This includes the class teacher and special education teacher in primary school, the class teacher and post-primary subject teachers in special schools and the subject teacher and special education teacher in post-primary schools unless otherwise stated.
the Plan	SNA Workforce Development Plan
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
Whole-school community	means school leaders, management, teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents/guardians and the wider local community.

Chapter 2
Introduction and Overview

2.1 Context and Purpose

The right to education for all children is enshrined in the Irish Constitution,[6] and the Education Act 1998,[7] ensuring that every child and young person (CYP) is supported and empowered to participate in all aspects of education and beyond, and to become active participants in learning and in school decision-making that shapes their positive school experience.

Inclusive education is described by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a continuous process that seeks to deliver high-quality education to all learners, while recognising and accommodating the diverse needs, abilities, characteristics and expectations of children and young people.[8] This understanding is reflected in the department's *Inclusive education for all Department of Education and Youth Statement of Strategy 2025–2028*[9] which emphasises the development of school environments that actively promote a culture of inclusion and support.

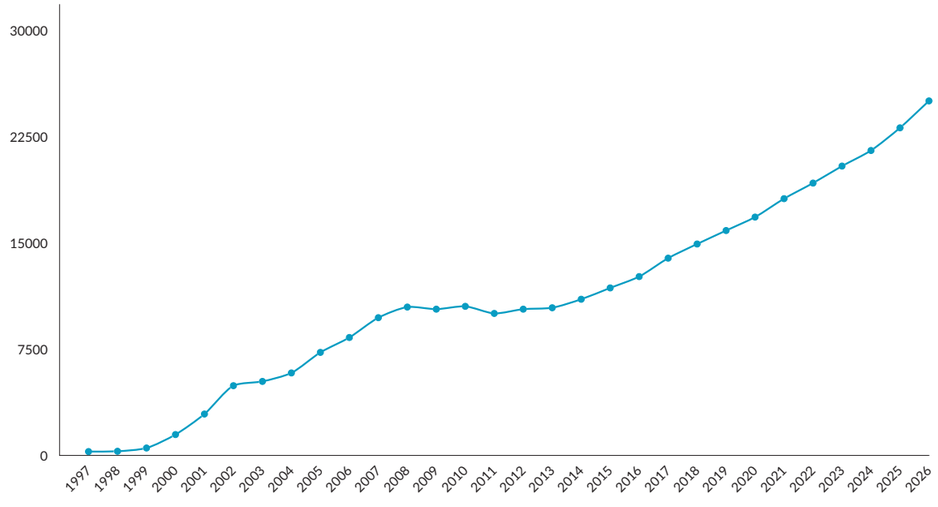
Ensuring that all students, particularly those with special educational needs have access to appropriate supports, is critical not only for educational outcomes, but also for broader social and economic participation.[10] SNAs are central to achieving this objective. Research shows that SNAs provide vital care and support that enables students with special educational needs to attend school with their peers, engage with learning, and participate in school life. SNAs operate at the frontline of the education system, providing essential care and support. They are instrumental in underpinning inclusion in practice. Their contribution extends beyond individual students; it supports the effective functioning of classrooms and strengthens the capacity of schools to respond to diverse needs.

The number of SNAs employed across Irish schools has grown steadily over recent decades, reflecting demographic growth, increased demand for SNA support and a sustained policy commitment to supporting students with special educational needs. By September 2026, it is expected that there will be approximately 25,000 SNA posts in the education system, with overall investment in special education projected to exceed €3 billion. This expansion spans mainstream schools, special classes and special schools, and signals the central role of SNAs to delivery of an inclusive education system.

The SNA Workforce Development Plan 2026–2031 has been developed in response to this growth and complexity. It sets out a strategic approach to ensuring that the workforce is appropriately structured, skilled and supported to meet current demands while remaining responsive to future change.

6 Irish Statute Book Constitution of Ireland.
7 Education Act, 1998, Section 6.
8 Policy guidelines on inclusion in education – UNESCO Digital Library.
9 Statement of Strategy 2025–2028.
10 Equity and Inclusion in Education: finding strength through diversity – OECD Education and Skills Today.

Increase in SNA posts 1997-2026



Source: IGEES Focused Policy Assessment of Data on Special Needs Assistants and Dept. of Ed and Youth Statistics.

2.2 Evolution of the Role

The role of the SNA has evolved over time and is now an integral part of the Irish education system in supporting students with special educational needs.

The origins of the workforce can be tracked back to the introduction of *the Child Care Assistants Scheme* which commenced in the 1979–1980 school year.[11] At that time, the role was primarily designed to provide non-teaching support in special schools. Child Care Assistants were recruited specifically to support teachers in special schools and were assigned duties by the principal or class teacher. Duties focused on practical and care-related tasks, including assisting with personal care, supervision, and classroom preparation. The role explicitly excluded teaching responsibilities.

Policy began to shift in the early 1990s with the establishment of the Special Education Review Committee in 1991 highlighting the need for more structured and widespread provision of support for students with special educational needs. This work informed a major policy initiative in 1998, introducing automatic entitlement to both teaching and care supports for students with assessed needs, marking a major step forward in inclusive education.[12] Additionally, the Education Act 1998 established a legal framework to provide for the education of every child in the state, including children with special educational needs.

The early 2000s brought further clarity and structure. Circular 07/02 *Applications for Full-time or Part-time Special Needs Assistant Support to Address the Special Care Needs of Children with*

11 Letter Announcing Child-Care Assistant Scheme 1979, Annex 3, pp 118–125.
12 Major Initiative in Special Education Services. "Move marks breakthrough for integrated education and children with autism.", Press Release, Annex 5, pp 127–128.

Disabilities, formally introduced the title "Special Needs Assistant" and set out a framework for allocating support based on identified care needs. It established a more consistent, evidence-based approach, while maintaining the non-teaching nature of the role. Subsequent guidance reinforced this position, emphasising that SNAs support students whose needs arise from disability and relate to care rather than instruction.

As Ireland's education system moved towards greater inclusion, the SNA role evolved, both in scale and scope. Legislative developments such as the EPSEN Act 2004, reinforced the right of students with special educational needs to access appropriate supports within mainstream settings wherever possible. At the same time, the establishment of the NCSE introduced a more structured approach to resource allocation. In light of such policy changes, subsequent years saw a remarkable growth in the number of SNAs in the Irish education system, with total numbers increasing from 2,988 in 2001 to 10,342 in 2009.[13] This upward trend continued after Ireland's economic recession with additional SNA posts introduced every year since 2014, representing a significant increase in the availability of care support.[14]

Over time, the role of the SNA began to stretch beyond its original parameters. In practice, responsibilities were sometimes interpreted broadly, leading to variation across schools and a degree of ambiguity about the boundaries of the role.

These issues were examined in the *2011 Value for Money Review of the SNA scheme*[15]. The review confirmed the importance of the "scheme" as it was described at that time, but found that its purpose was not always clearly understood. It pointed to inconsistencies in how support was allocated and used, and raised concerns about the potential for over-reliance on SNA support among students. The review concluded that clearer role definition and stronger guidance were needed.

In May 2013, the NCSE published its *Policy Advice on Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Schools*.[16] Both reports concluded that the SNA scheme has been highly successful in supporting the care needs of children and young people with special educational needs in schools and with assisting to facilitate their integration and inclusion. However, the reports also concluded that the intended purpose of the scheme was not always generally well understood by parents or schools and that the scope and purpose of the scheme should be clarified.

Circular 0030/2014 published on 10 April 2014, sought to address these concerns.[17] It reaffirmed that the primary purpose of the SNA role is to meet the care needs of students with disabilities and emphasised the importance of promoting independence. The circular also clarified that while SNAs contribute to the broader educational experience of students they do not have a teaching role.

The trend of increasing SNA numbers has continued year on year. Budget 2026 has provided an additional 1,717 SNA posts, the largest number ever allocated in a single year, meaning the total number of SNA posts available in our schools in September 2026 will be approximately 25,000. In addition, funding for approximately 500 additional SNA posts is being provided to meet budgetary requirements.

13 Special Educational Needs, Dáil Éireann Debate, Wednesday – 15 December 2010.

14 Circular No. 0006/2011, Circular to Boards of Management and Principal Teachers of Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools on revised arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistant posts.

15 The Special Needs Assistant Scheme a Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme 2007/8–2010, June 2011, Department of Education.

16 Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools.

17 Special Educational Needs Service Provision, Dáil Éireann Debate, Tuesday – 27 May 2014.

It is important that we continue to meet the needs of students with special educational needs across our education system and the Programme for Government commits to providing for the recruitment of additional SNA posts to provide greater support to students and schools.[18] The increasing numbers of SNA posts reflects a significant enhancement in the provision of support, enabling students to participate fully in learning and school life, and to develop greater independence.

2.3 Evolution of Inclusive Education

The role of the SNA must be understood within the broader shift towards inclusive education, aligned with the principles promoted by UNESCO. There has been a significant move away from segregated educational settings towards greater inclusion within mainstream schools. Increasingly, CYP with special educational needs are supported to learn alongside their peers in local school communities. This has not only enhanced access and participation in education, but it has also supported social development, family experience, and community cohesion. Inclusive environments promote respect for diversity, encourage acceptance of difference, and contribute to a more equitable education system.

Recent societal challenges have increasingly been reflected within schools and across the wider education system. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have had significant impacts on students, families, and school communities, creating new and evolving demands on educational supports and services. During periods of such uncertainty and change, the education system relies heavily on a flexible and responsive workforce that can adapt to emerging needs, support increasingly diverse school communities, and continue to deliver high-quality educational and care supports for students.

Changing population trends can have an impact on the SNA workforce. Primary school enrolments have begun to decline following recent peaks, while post-primary enrolments continue to grow and are expected to remain comparatively high in the near term. This shift will require careful planning to ensure that resources are allocated equitably and effectively across the education system to address needs based on the student profile in schools. In particular, this trend signals a likely increase in demand for SNA support at post-primary level, where student needs may differ in nature and complexity.

18 programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf

2.4 Workforce Development and Reform

The development of the SNA workforce has taken place alongside wider public service reform. Since 2005, SNAs have been employed under formal contracts aligned with public service terms and conditions. Over time, successive national agreements have shaped pay, working conditions and expectations.

Agreements such as Croke Park, Haddington Road and Building Momentum – New Public Service Agreement 2021–2022, provided a framework for stability during periods of economic and social change. They also created space for reform. Building Momentum placed a requirement on the department, in consultation with Fórsa, the trade union representing SNAs, to update the SNA contract, including the appropriate use of the contracted 72 hours and provisions around training. This provided the first opportunity to review the SNA contract since its introduction 21 years ago.

Industrial relations structures have also evolved. The establishment of a dedicated SNA Industrial Relations Forum in 2019 created a more structured channel for engagement between the department and staff representatives. This has supported a more proactive approach to addressing workforce issues as they arise.

The current Public Service Agreement 2024–2026 builds on this foundation and provides a framework for modernisation across the public sector. It specifically commits to reviewing the SNA contract, professionalising entry pathways, and improving workforce support mechanisms. These commitments are reflected directly in the Plan exhibiting a recognition that the workforce must continue to evolve in line with the needs of students and schools.

2.5 Strategic and Policy Context

The SNA Workforce Development Plan is anchored in a broad legislative and policy landscape. Ireland's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasises the right of all persons with disabilities to access inclusive, quality education on an equal basis with others. To uphold these commitments, the education system must maintain a workforce that can support students with diverse needs and this is a critical element for such an education system.

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty requires public bodies, including schools, to actively promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the rights of those they serve.[19] For the SNA workforce, this means developing the skills, awareness and diversity needed to support an inclusive education system.

Recognising the importance of a more strategic approach to special education, the department established a dedicated SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) in December 2022. The SNAWDU leads the development and implementation of this Plan with an objective of developing an enhanced SNA service to support the best outcome for students with special educational needs in our schools and a focus on ensuring that the SNA workforce is sustainable, responsive and aligned with broader education system goals.

19 Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

2.6 A Workforce Planning Approach

Workforce planning refers to a systematic process of analysing, forecasting, and planning workforce supply and demand to ensure that the right number of people, with the right skills, are in the right place at the right time.[20] Effective workforce planning is central to delivering a high-quality SNA service. It involves more than simply increasing numbers. It requires careful analysis of need and sustained attention to the skills and capabilities across the workforce. The Plan aligns core business goals with the department's people strategy.

Within the SNA workforce this means looking ahead in the context of the evolving nature of inclusive education. It requires systems that can respond in a timely and proportionate way, ensuring that supports are aligned with assessed need and informed by robust evidence. Workforce planning must therefore be dynamic, drawing on data, professional insight and lived stakeholder experience to guide decision-making at both national and local level.

A key element of this approach means recognising the importance of the school context; leadership, collaboration and whole-school planning are all critical in ensuring that SNA support is employed to maximum effect.

At the same time, workforce planning must maintain a clear focus on outcomes for students. While SNAs play a vital role in supporting special educational needs, their work should be framed within a broader objective of promoting student independence, progress, participation and wellbeing. Achieving the right balance is essential: supports should be sufficient and responsive and so should not inadvertently create reliance where greater independence can be supported.

This Plan adopts a strategic and forward-looking approach to workforce planning. It explicitly links the development of the SNA workforce to wider policy objectives in inclusive education and ensures coherence with broader education system reforms.

Finally, effective workforce planning is underpinned by investment in capability. This includes access to high-quality training, clear role definition and opportunities for ongoing professional development and enhanced job security. It also requires engagement with stakeholders; schools, SNAs, parents and students to ensure that workforce policies are informed by those directly affected. In this way, workforce planning becomes not just an exercise, but a collaborative and adaptive process that supports the delivery of an equitable and effective SNA service.

20 Workforce planning.

2.7 The Vision

A key step in developing the workforce development plan was to set a vision for the SNA workforce to align with the overall vision for the public sector workforce, as set out in Better Public Services, of a skilled, motivated workforce, supported by dynamic career development, progressive policies and inclusive workplace cultures.

This vision was developed in consultation with stakeholders to set the strategic direction for the Plan. The vision for the SNA workforce also reflected the department's 2023-2025 Statement of Strategy at the time, which sought to achieve "an education system that is of the highest quality and where every member of our educational communities, including our children and young people, their families and all the staff that engage with them feel valued and supported". [21]

The vision for the SNA Workforce Development Plan is of:

> *"a dynamic, diverse and professional workforce of Special Needs Assistants that is supported and respected within an inclusive school community and who provide high quality, appropriate care to children and young people with significant care needs, to facilitate their attendance, participation and inclusion in school to achieve their full potential".*

2.8 The SNA Workforce Development Plan

The development of the SNA Workforce Development Plan has been informed by an extensive programme of research and consultation. This work brought together the perspectives of SNAs, school leaders, teachers and, importantly, children and young people.

Engagement with SNAs has highlighted both the strengths of the current system and what can be improved. Consultations with school leaders and teachers have provided insight into how the role operates within classrooms and across schools. A national survey of SNAs has established a strong baseline understanding of the workforce, while a comprehensive literature review has examined international evidence and best practice.

The voices of children and young people have been particularly important. Their experiences underline the positive impact that SNAs have on wellbeing, participation and learning. They also reinforce the importance of getting the model of support right.

This engagement is intended to ensure that those directly involved in delivering the service have a meaningful opportunity to contribute their perspectives, inform policy direction and shape the future development of the SNA workforce.

To provide clarity, coherence and strategic focus, the Plan will set out a series of policy developments organised under five interrelated pillars. These are designed to address both the current operation of the service and its longer-term development.

Pillar 1 focuses on the review and further development of the SNA role, ensuring it remains aligned with student care needs and reflects best practice. **Pillar 2** provides for the establishment of a Quality Framework to support consistency, accountability and continuous improvement across the workforce. **Pillar 3** introduces a structured Learning and Development Programme, aimed at strengthening capability and supporting SNAs in carrying out their role effectively.

21 Department of Education Statement of Strategy, 2023–2025.

Pillar 4 addresses recruitment, retention and diversity, with a view to ensuring a sustainable and representative SNA workforce. Finally, **Pillar 5** devises a Communications Strategy to improve clarity, engagement and shared understanding of the SNA role across the education system.

Taken together, these pillars form a coherent and forward-looking programme of reform, aimed at strengthening the effectiveness, consistency and sustainability of the SNA workforce. At its core, the Plan recognises that the quality of support provided to students with special educational needs depends not only on structures and policy, but on how school leaders, teachers and SNAs work together in practice. By reinforcing this collaborative approach, and by providing clearer role definition, stronger supports and a shared framework for quality, the Plan seeks to ensure that all those involved are equipped and encouraged to deliver the best possible outcomes for students. In doing so, it will help position the SNA workforce to respond effectively to evolving needs within an increasingly inclusive education system.

2.9 Challenges and Strategic Context

The development of the Plan addressed limited availability of comprehensive data on the SNA role, gaps in existing research, and challenges in directly engaging with a large and dispersed workforce. The department planned and implemented an extensive programme of research and consultation. Engagement with SNAs, CYP, Fórsa, the recognised trade union for the SNA workforce, and other key stakeholders across the education sector helped to build a more robust understanding of the SNA role and its operational context. This strengthened evidence base has informed policy development and contributed to more grounded and effective decision-making.

The department embedded consultation and collaboration throughout the planning process. Stakeholders were provided with opportunities to contribute meaningfully to discussions and influence policy direction. Where differing perspectives emerged, decisions were guided by a commitment to achieving balanced outcomes, taking a child centred approach with the needs and best interests of students supported by SNAs as the key consideration.

2.10 Strategic Workforce Development as an Ongoing Process

The department recognises that workforce planning is not a one-off initiative but an ongoing, iterative process. While some outcomes may be realised in the short term, others will require sustained effort over several years. Continuous review is essential to ensure that the system remains responsive to emerging needs and capable of achieving long-term strategic goals.

While SNAs play a critical role in supporting students, the effectiveness of the SNA post relies on the wider support structures within schools and the education system. This includes access to guidance, professional development, leadership, and collaborative working environments. The policy framework underpinning the Plan seeks to strengthen these supports, ensuring that SNAs are equipped to meet the evolving demands of their role. It also reflects broader changes in education, including increased focus on wellbeing, inclusion, and holistic student support.

the Plan is underpinned by the core values of the department, with a strong emphasis on collaboration, inclusion, and respect. The best interests of children and young people remain central to all decision-making processes. At the same time, the Plan recognises the vital contribution of SNAs and other school staff and seeks to support them through practical and sustainable measures. Importantly, the proposed actions are designed to alleviate pressures on school communities rather than add to them. Where responsibilities such as induction and probation already exist, the Plan aims to enhance supports and provide greater clarity and consistency, enabling schools to fulfil these functions more effectively.

Overall, the Plan represents a strategic and evidence-informed response to a rapidly evolving education landscape. Its success will ultimately depend on sustained implementation, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and the capacity of the system to adapt over time. the Plan sets out to enhance inclusive practice across schools, improve outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs, and contribute to a more equitable and responsive education system.

Chapter 3
The planning process

3.1 Support for the Plan

The SNA Workforce Development Plan (the Plan) has been developed by the Department of Education and Youth and is overseen by an interagency Steering Group. The Steering Group is chaired by the department's Assistant Secretary General with responsibility for special education. The chair is supported by the CEO of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the Director of National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the department's Chief Inspector, other senior managers from the department, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and two independent experts.

Two stakeholder groups were convened to provide feedback on proposals. The first stakeholder group consisted of representatives from school management bodies, disability advocacy groups and parent and student representative groups. The second stakeholder group consisted solely of SNAs working in a variety of settings including primary, post-primary, special schools and a Gaelscoil. It also included an SNA working in a substitute capacity. These groups provided a range of stakeholder perspectives to ensure policy development is grounded and achievable.

Details of the membership of these groups can be found at Appendix B. The terms of reference for each group are available at Appendix A.

A working group was established for each of the five pillars of the Plan. Participants included representatives from the school management bodies, SNAs, trade union representatives as well as NCSE and department officials. Details of participants for each of the five Working Groups can be found at Appendix B.

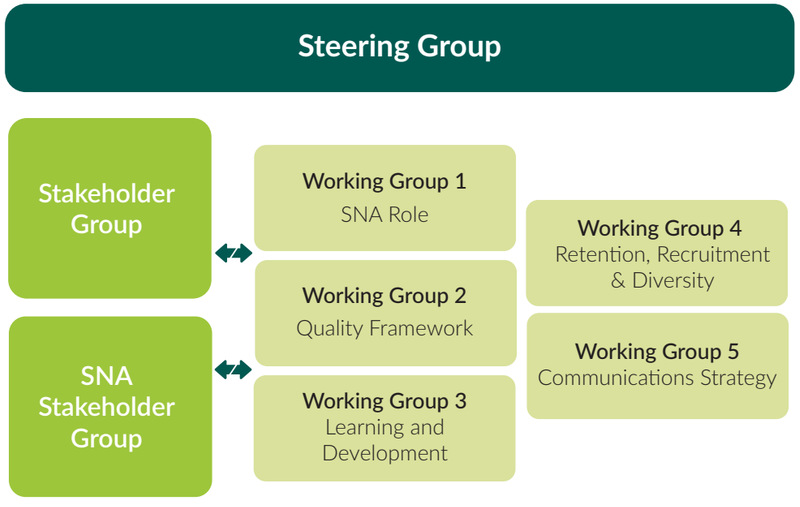


Figure 1: Established Groups.

3.2 Designing a Framework for the Plan

the Plan is divided into three distinct phases.

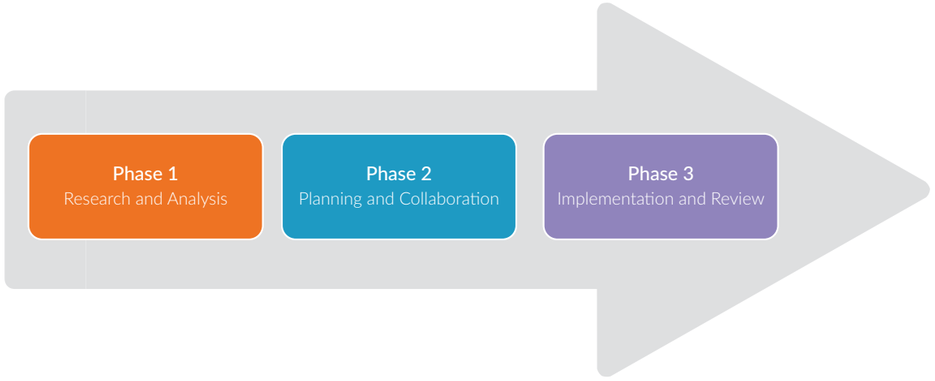


Figure 2: SNA Workforce Development Planning Framework.

Phase 1 involved research and analysis, followed by Phase 2 the planning and collaboration phase. Discussion and development of proposals for the Plan took place in phase 2, including the completion of an action plan with key deliverables and timelines for completion.

Phase 3, post publication, will involve implementation and review of the proposed actions outlined in the Plan.

3.3 Phase 1 – Research and Analysis

The initial phase of the Plan focused on conducting extensive qualitative and quantitative research and analysis, led by the department in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. This work aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the SNA role in practice. It sought to build understanding of what is working well and what needs to be improved while also identifying the challenges and opportunities.

The following research was conducted by the department:

- Regional SNA focus groups on SNA learning and development were conducted in May 2023. The SNA Learning and Development Focus Group Report May 2023 was published in September 2023 includes focus group findings and recommendations, and is available on www.gov.ie.
- A comprehensive national survey of SNAs was completed by 7,410 SNAs representing approximately 35% of the workforce. This data has helped to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the role of the SNA in the different educational settings and to explore and enhance the role that SNAs play in facilitating inclusion. The Report on National Survey of Special Needs Assistants has been published on www.gov.ie.

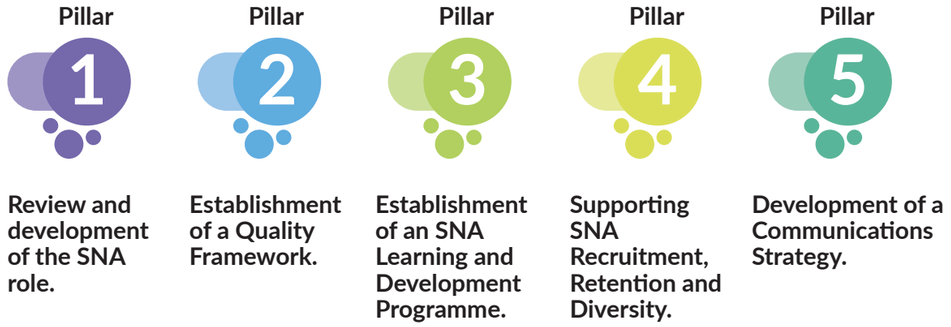
- Focus groups with principals and deputy principals took place in early 2024 in relation to the SNA role and duties, upskilling and training, and relationships, and communication in the classroom and the school. The Report on Focus Groups with School Leaders is available on www.gov.ie.
- Focus groups were also held with teachers in September 2024 to gain the perspective from the teacher in the classroom and their relationships with the SNA. The Role of Special Needs Assistants: Report on Focus Groups with Teachers is available on www.gov.ie.
- The department commissioned a scoping literature review in December 2024 to examine published research showing evidence of best practice in relation to the role and duties of the SNA and/or paraprofessionals. This contract was awarded to Dublin City University (DCU). This review confirmed findings in the focus groups and discussions among the Working Groups with stakeholders on the Plan. Scoping Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants/Teaching Assistants/Paraprofessionals is available on www.gov.ie.
- Consultation with children and young people seeking their views on the role of SNAs was completed in early 2025. This consultation was to ensure to embed the voice of children and young people in policy decisions on the SNA role that impact them. The role of Special Needs Assistants: Report on consultations with children and young people is available on www.gov.ie.

In addition to the qualitative research data and the findings of the survey, further quantitative data and evidence were required to inform and support strategic decision making and to help understand the SNA workforce, their work environment and their impact on the education sector and to plan for the future of the workforce.

Compiling information to assist with policy decision making was a challenge. Work was completed to overcome this barrier by building existing data into an SNA database using statistical information reported by schools and through the survey of the SNAs themselves. This data is complemented by information provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) derived from analysis of most recent census data. Analysis of this data has helped to provide a definite profile of the SNA workforce to assist with planning and decision making for the Plan and into the future.

3.4 Themes

A number of definitive themes emerged during the research and analysis phase of the Plan. These themes formed the basis for the five pillars of the Plan to be addressed in Phase 2.



3.5 Phase 2 – Collaboration and Planning

Insights from Phase one were used to shape the direction of Phase two, which focused on drafting the proposals for the SNA Workforce Development Plan and setting out clear deliverables and timelines. This phase was structured around five core pillars:

- **Pillar 1** – Review and Development of the SNA Role.
- **Pillar 2** – Establishment of a Quality Framework.
- **Pillar 3** – Establishment of an SNA Learning and Development Programme.
- **Pillar 4** – Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention, and Diversity.
- **Pillar 5** – Development of a Communications Strategy.

Each pillar represents a thematic area explored in-depth by the relevant working group. All proposals to be included in the Plan were approved by the Steering Group.

Towards the end of Phase 2, meetings were convened with the Working Groups and stakeholder groups to review work completed and outline final proposals.

3.6 Phase 3 – Implementation and Review

The final phase involves the implementation of the Plan and a structured process for review and reflection. During the implementation phase the department will:

- Evaluate the Plan by comparing proposals with outcomes.
- Outline the next steps for sustaining and building upon the progress made.

Regular reports will be provided to the Steering Group in order to ensure that key deliverables are on track as set out in the Action Plan.

A Post-Implementation Review (PIR) will also be conducted to evaluate the extent to which objectives were achieved, to determine how effectively the project was run and to consider whether the vision for the SNA workforce has been delivered.

Chapter 4

Pillar 1 Review and Development of the SNA Role

1

4.1 Breakthrough for Integrated Education

History of the role

The SNA role has its origins in the introduction in December 1979 of a childcare assistant role to provide non-teaching assistance for class teachers in special schools[22]. From the 1990s, internationally there was a move away from segregated provision for students with special educational needs towards including these students in mainstream education.

Since the formal introduction of the SNA role in 1998, the workforce has evolved into an essential service for students with special educational needs and SNAs have an integral role in whole school communities. While the growth in the workforce is noteworthy – by the end of 2026 there will be approximately 25,000 SNAs in the Irish education system – it has also accompanied and facilitated positive, transformative change in schools and in social norms around special education. It is now broadly accepted that all children and young people should have the opportunity to attend school with their peers, and that the education system should provide appropriate support to achieve this objective. While the path to inclusion is ongoing, SNAs have played a key part in its significant progress in the 27 years since the inception of the role[23].

Through many changes in the education system and society the SNA role, has remained largely the same. Among the changes are the introduction of the bus escort role and the publication of the Education Act in 1998, which includes a provision for schools to ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for. The SNA role has remained a non-teaching position allocated to schools to support the care of students, with a focus on developing student independence. The assignment of the SNA as a whole-school resource rather than to a specific student in 2017 introduced a change which provided for a more flexible, responsive SNA workforce while also providing greater job security for SNAs.

Policy around the role and duties of the SNA is currently set out in department Circular 30/2014. This circular acknowledges the vital role SNAs play in meeting the primary care needs of students with special educational needs in schools and provides comprehensive guidance on the allocation, purpose and deployment of SNAs in recognised schools. With the passage of time, while the role remains primarily a caring role it has nonetheless evolved into a more holistic supportive role.

22 Microsoft Word – SNA VFM Final June 2011 – A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme 2007/8–2010 June 2011.

23 Microsoft Word – SNA VFM Final June 2011 – A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme 2007/8–2010 June 2011.

4.2 Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme

The NCSE's comprehensive review of the SNA scheme in 2018[24] provides valuable insight into the SNA role at that time. The consultation process showed that education stakeholders highly valued the SNA role. While the report acknowledged that SNAs greatly assisted students in attending mainstream and special schools, it also outlined some challenges, particularly the perception among teachers, principals and parents that SNAs were the solution for all issues. The report noted that "Their view is that it is the only support available and for which they can apply on behalf of students with special educational needs".

The report also noted that SNA support alone cannot address the range, diversity, and complexity of student needs. Over-reliance on adult support, to the detriment of developing independent living skills, was also noted as a concern.

The review also highlighted the need for student support to be delivered as part of a system complemented by class and specialist teachers, SNAs, teacher supply, school leadership and HSE supports. There was reference to a blurring of roles between teachers and SNAs in some schools, where SNAs were being given a teaching type remit and some students with care needs were being 'taught' for part of the day by SNAs. As a result, these students were spending time away from their class teachers and peers with people who, however well-intentioned, were not qualified teachers.

The review proposed a new model of SNA support aimed at delivering better outcomes for students with additional needs. This model included a frontloading of posts and deployment of support using the Continuum of Support Framework[25] which enables schools to identify and respond to needs in a flexible way. It also highlighted the need for SNAs to access appropriate training tailored to their role within the school setting.

4.3 Current Policy

The role of the SNA is currently set out in department Circular 30/2014 and Circular 71/2011. The 2014 circular describes the purpose of the SNA scheme (as it was described at that time) and outlines primary care needs for which SNA support will usually be allocated. It also details the types of secondary care tasks which SNAs may perform, but only after they have been allocated on the basis of a requirement to provide for primary care needs. The circular further describes the role of the classroom teacher and resource/learning support teachers in providing for the education of a student, and the role of the SNA in supporting those teachers in assisting with care needs. Additional information includes details of the NCSE allocation process and how parents or schools may appeal the level of SNA support allocated for a student.

24 NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 6 – Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme – March 2018.

25 Special Education Needs a Continuum of Support.

Circular 71/2011 sets out revised employment terms and conditions for SNAs as provided in the relevant public service agreement "to identify and remove any impediments to the provision of efficient and effective support for pupils with special care needs". It specifies that under the existing contract, SNAs are required to be available for a number of days at the start and finish of each school term, not exceeding 12 in total and no more than 5 consecutive days. The circular introduced greater flexibility by allowing these 12 days to be converted into an additional bank of 72 hours, which can be utilised outside of normal school opening hours and/or the normal school year. The circular also set out a non-exhaustive list of duties.

4.4 Review, revise, refresh, renew

Since the publication of circulars 30/2014 and 71/2011 on the role of the SNA the workforce has more than doubled in size and is now approaching 25,000. In the interim, among other developments is the establishment of the SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) in 2022, and the announcement of work on the first SNA Workforce Development Plan in October 2023. Qualitative research through focus groups, undertaken in preparation for the Plan, pointed to the need to review the circulars to provide clarity and reflect the evolved role of the SNA. Each set of stakeholders, SNAs, teachers and school leaders agreed that a review of the role is necessary.

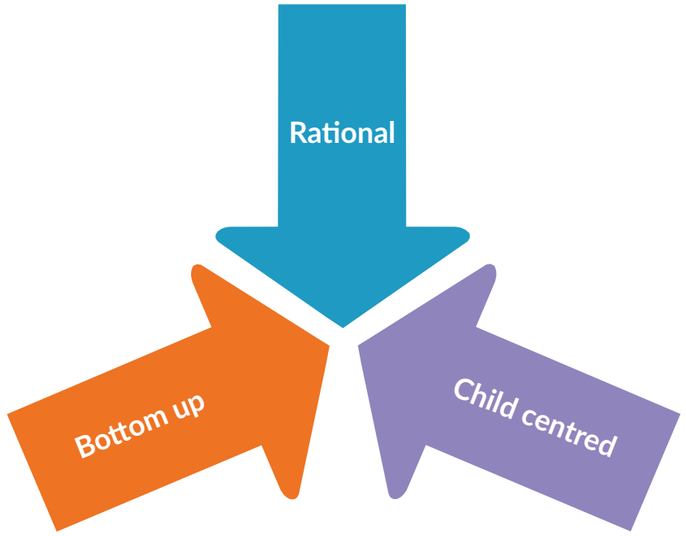
It is appropriate to re-examine policy on the role of the SNA to ensure the SNA service is aligned with the evolving education system and the ongoing pursuit of inclusive education. The review of circular 30/2014 and circular 71/2011, as part of work on the first SNA Workforce Development Plan, aims to provide clarity on the role and duties of the SNA and, in turn, assist with the effective deployment of this key human resource in schools. The review also aims to provide clear policy provisions to ensure consistency and a standardised approach to the role across all schools.

The review and development of the SNA role serve as the anchor for the other pillars of the Plan. It sets the strategic direction for the SNA workforce that will soon number 25,000.

4.5 Approach to the Review

An extensive examination of the SNA role has been undertaken taking a child-centred perspective, with the best interests of the children and young people serving as the benchmark for policy decisions. Rather than taking an incremental approach, building on the role description set out in existing circulars, the review adopted a rational approach, returning to first principles.

A bottom-up approach was taken through consultation with key stakeholders, including students, SNAs, teachers and school leaders who are best placed to understand the impact of the SNA role on school communities and on the children and young people they support. Input from parents and other stakeholders also inform the strategic direction of the review.



Approach to review of the SNA role

Significant qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in preparation for the Plan (see 3.3) provides important insight from the perspective of SNAs, teachers, school leaders, and students on how the SNA service is currently delivered and how it might be enhanced.

The working group established to review and develop the SNA role comprises a range of stakeholders with varying perspectives. This group provided valuable input to identify strategies to achieve the vision of the SNA Workforce Development Plan. Discussions focused on examining the interaction between the SNA role and other key roles within the school community. The group carefully considered what the SNA needs from each of the other stakeholders, and in turn what the stakeholders need from the SNA, to deliver the best educational experience and outcome for students.

4.6 Researching the SNA Role

The review of the SNA role was supported by primary research through a series of focus groups with SNAs, teachers, school leaders and students. The involvement of all key stakeholders provided a comprehensive 360-degree view of the SNA role.

Policymaking was also informed by discussion in the collaborative Working Groups established for each pillar of the Plan. Presentations from parents of students with special educational needs and others to the working and stakeholder groups enriched the discussions and ensured the child centred focus was maintained.

Feedback and data from the qualitative research, coupled with quantitative research gained through the national survey, and DEY statistical information, provided rich and varied data to support decision making.

Research and collaboration were complemented by a scoping review commissioned to validate and contextualise some of the findings from the initial research. The literature review completes the triangulation of research for the Plan by providing empirical evidence in relation to the role of SNAs in Ireland and paraprofessionals in similar roles internationally.

This triangulation mitigates any bias in feedback and increases confidence in the decision making around proposals for the SNA Workforce Development Plan. All policy decisions taken are based on extensive research feedback and findings, and supported by statistics and published empirical research.

Research on the SNA Role

4.7 Scoping Review

With support from the Steering Group, a procurement process for a literature scoping review was completed in December 2024. The objective of the review was to examine the range of SNA and paraprofessional frameworks and approaches presented in published, peer-reviewed literature around the role and duties of the SNA. The final report[26] *Scoping Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants/Teaching Assistants/Paraprofessionals* was published in August 2025.

The review had the following aims:

1. To examine the role and duties of the special needs assistant (or international equivalent) in schools, under three separate areas, in order to answer the four research questions.
2. To document the use of frameworks in published, peer-reviewed literature to guide the role of SNAs and/or paraprofessionals in supporting care needs and independence development in mainstream primary, post-primary and special school settings for children and young people receiving SNA and/or paraprofessional support.
3. To describe the frameworks and constructs used as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the frameworks, where stated.
4. To determine how transferrable these frameworks are to the Irish context.
5. To propose frameworks that may be applicable to the development of the SNA role in the Irish context (Department of Education, 2024).

Four research questions were carefully framed to narrow the focus of the review for the research team and to elicit the type of information that was required by the department. The main findings in response to these questions are set out below:

Research Questions

Q1 What does the empirical literature tell us about the role of SNAs and/or paraprofessionals in facilitating and reinforcing learning for students?

The research found that overall SNAs are vital contributors to inclusive education and that thoughtful policy and workforce planning are essential to harness their full potential.

The evidence also consistently demonstrates that while SNAs can significantly enhance inclusion, engagement, and independence, their impact is shaped by how their roles are defined, supported, and integrated within school teams. This is dependent on deployment, training and collaboration with teachers to enable them to scaffold learning without fostering dependency.

The report acknowledges that the presence of SNAs within classrooms has opened pathways to greater inclusion. It also notes that the absence of well defined responsibliites and inconsistent integration into the teaching team frequently undermines the effectiveness of the SNA support.

26 Scoping_Literature_Review_of_the_Role_of_Special_Needs_Assistants_.pdf

Q2 What frameworks or models of SNA and/or paraprofessional support provide evidence of the impacts of such support on student learning?

The following six models of SNA deployment and support are explored in this section of the report:

1. Whole Class Deployment
2. In-class Targeted Support
3. Withdrawal Intervention Delivery
4. Itinerant Model
5. Unit Support
6. One-to-One Model

Notably, the review found that one to one arrangements can, if poorly managed, inadvertently hinder student independence, restrict peer and teacher interaction and create barriers to educational engagement in the longer term.

It found that a more student-centred approach focused on scaffolding learning, dynamic fading, peer engagement and collaboration with teachers offers a stronger foundation for reinforcing meaningful learning, fostering greater independence and a more sustainable inclusion.

Q3 What evidence is there to show that practice in the Irish context aligns with policy in relation to the role of SNAs in fostering independence in children with special education needs, where appropriate?

It is notable that, of the 18 Irish based studies ranging from 2008 to 2024, 13 have been published since the publication of the previous department circular 30/0214 on the Role of the SNA. They focus on a range of settings and include single and multi-sector studies. There are also a range of stakeholders, and the voice of the child is included in six of the studies. The team acknowledge some of the limitations with the Irish research in that much of it is based on small or moderate samples.

The research concludes that, with appropriate training, SNAs can support academic, communication, social, emotional, behaviour and independence outcomes under teacher supervision with both SNA and teacher having a shared understanding of their roles. The report notes that preparation for life/independence is not the sole responsibility of the SNA, this occurs within the context of a whole school approach.

Q4 What evidence is there to show that SNAs and/or paraprofessional play a positive role in supporting children and young people to access holistic education by carrying out duties such as assisting students to engage socially with peers and others, assisting with transitions and equipping students with essential life skills?

The reports details significant evidence that paraprofessionals can positively contribute to holistic education when they are adequately prepared, clearly guided, and meaningfully integrated into inclusive teaching teams. This requires structured, sustained training featuring modelling, coaching, feedback and joint learning and development and planning.

The literature demonstrates that the paraprofessional role can be especially impactful in promoting peer interaction, emotional and behavioural regulation, and the acquisition of life skills. It is noted, however that role ambiguity, limited professional development, and the potential for fostering dependency remain critical concerns. It is suggested that addressing these challenges through targeted policy and practice—emphasising inter-professional collaboration and evidence-informed professional learning—will be essential to optimise the contributions of paraprofessionals to inclusive education.

Overall, the findings in the report broadly reflect the findings in the department's research for the Plan particularly in relation to the evolved role of the SNA. The review reflects the stakeholder views that SNAs are invaluable to inclusive education. It does however show that this is reliant on their effective training and deployment. Their role is to enhance teacher-led learning, support care and inclusion, and promote independence. The framework provided in the review, based on the available research, sets out the key elements of effective deployment which with the right collaboration, planning, learning and supervision will result in the most effective service delivery.

The report on the scoping review provides a useful framework for deployment of SNAs. The recommendations in this framework, based on the empirical evidence, support the effective deployment of the SNA role in promoting inclusive education. This includes providing role clarity, collaboration and training and supervision for SNAs. It clearly states that SNA support should not be used as a substitute for teaching or specialist interventions. The framework also highlights risks when roles are misapplied.

SNAs work as part of the support team along with teachers, the principal, and their peers. Principals play a key leadership role in this dynamic.

The framework also highlights the importance of teachers and SNA working in partnership and highlights the importance of the allocation of time for joint planning. Effective deployment should be linked to SSPs and responsive to changing student needs. The student voice must also be included in planning associated with their care.

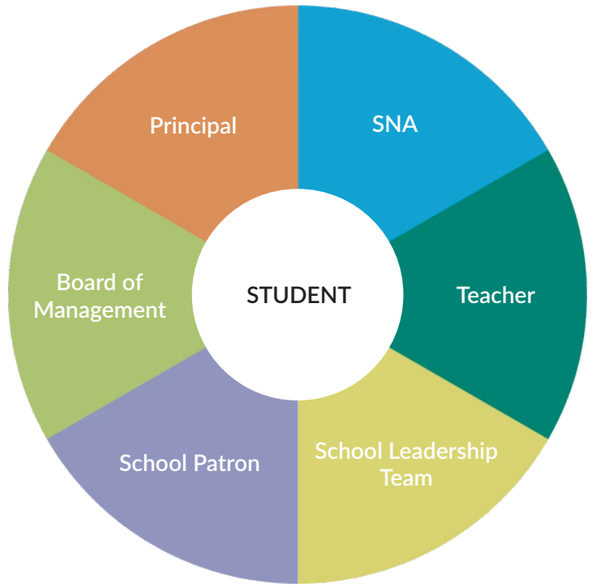
The literature review concluded that, with appropriate professional learning, SNAs can effectively contribute to academic achievement, communication, social emotional development, behavioural regulation, and the promotion of student independence, under the guidance and supervision of qualified teaching staff.

4.8 An Integral Role in the Whole School Community

The SNA is an integral member of the whole school community, that works together to create and maintain positive, productive, safe and inclusive learning environments for all students.

Feedback from the consultation process overall found that SNAs can make a real difference in a student's life and often act as an advocate for the student. Along with their role in the school SNAs can also provide an integral link between the student and others in the wider school community.

The first step in reviewing the SNA role was to identify all of the stakeholder roles in the immediate school community and determine how the SNA role interacts with each of these.



Key roles in the school community

The department through the **NCSE** provides for SNA support in recognised schools. SNA duties are assigned by the principal, or delegate of the principal or the board in accordance with department policy and NCSE guidance.

The roles in the school community include:

- The **patron** and the **board of management/Education and Training Board (ETB)** who employ SNAs and who manage the school on behalf of the patron.
- The school **principa**l who is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, including leadership, guidance and direction of the teachers and other staff of the school and the implementation of school policy. The principal is responsible for deploying staff within the school which may include appointing a delegate to fulfil this duty.
- The **class or subject teacher** is responsible for the education and personal development of students in schools. This requires targeted interventions to develop relevant skills related to these needs and to facilitate the meaningful inclusion of students with special educational needs. The teacher collaborates with the SNA(s) and provides guidance and direction to ensure the SNA is effectively supporting the student(s) to help them reach their potential.
- The **special education teacher** provides additional teaching to students with special education needs, and their role is to lead, model and ensure a high standard of provision. Special education teachers use a wide range of teaching approaches to meet a variety of student needs. This ensures that students with special educational needs in mainstream education are supported on their educational journey. Special education teachers are responsible for leading the development, implementation and review of student support plans for students that they are involved in providing direct additional teaching support for. Collaboration between the special education teacher, class or subject teacher, SNA, parent(s) and students themselves is a key principle in ensuring high quality provision to meet student's learning and care needs.

The SNA also interacts with a number of other stakeholders in the whole school community. This can include interaction with school transport drivers, school transport escorts, school secretaries and caretakers and with visitors to the school including special educational needs organisers (SENOs), therapists, psychologists and departmental Inspectors.

Key Stakeholders in Whole School Community

4.9 Responsive Role with Significant Variability

Examination of the role in its current form reveals a high level of responsiveness within the SNA workforce. While the circulars describe a range of responsibilities for the role, each of these duties may be relevant to a greater or lesser extent depending on the context or setting of the SNA post. The SNA role is dynamic and flexible adapting to the changing, individual care needs of students. SNAs are allocated as a whole school resource and may work with students with a variety of needs throughout the school day. This assists the teacher(s) and promotes safety and inclusion of students with significant care needs.

This dynamic nature of the SNA role is reflected even within the same school setting. As an example, two SNAs working in mainstream classes may provide very different types of support, depending on the needs of the students. Similarly, within a special class or special school, the type of support and the duties undertaken may differ. Therefore, from a workforce planning perspective, it would not be appropriate to segment the workforce into primary, post-primary, special school posts. Each form the SNA role takes can be described as a business-critical post with high impact and strategic value.

4.10 Support for Core Care Needs

The primary responsibility of the SNA is to provide adult support to meet the core care needs of students in the school community. This duty previously set out in Circular 30/2014 and referred to as primary care needs, is restated in department Circular 0032/2026, published in June 2026. This central role of the SNA is vital for these students to enable their successful inclusion to attend, participate and reach their full potential in school with their peers.

The NCSE determines a school's SNA allocation to meet the core care needs of all students in line with the Continuum of Support. This framework (Support for All, School Support, School Support Plus) helps schools identify and monitor the care needs of all students to determine the appropriate allocation. In making this determination the NCSE adopts a holistic appraisal of SNA duties as they relate to school life and in line with the continuum.

SNAs are allocated as a school-based resource to meet student needs, providing flexibility in how the support is used. During the school day once the core care needs of students have been met, SNAs may fulfil additional duties appropriate to their role. These additional duties are referred to as Student Support duties and are detailed in Circular 0032/2026 on the role of the SNA.

As with core care needs, student support duties, are assigned by the principal, delegate or the board in accordance with this circular and associated department policy and NCSE guidance.

Section 22 (1) of the Education Act states the primacy and responsibility of the teacher in the education and personal development of students in schools. This requires targeted interventions to develop relevant skills related to these needs and to facilitate the meaningful inclusion of students with special educational needs.

Collaboration between the teacher and SNA is important in terms of providing guidance and direction to ensure the SNA is effectively supporting the student(s) to elicit the best outcomes for them.

4.11 Other Forms of SNA support

The research undertaken for the Plan indicates that SNAs support a range of needs other than those which are seen as care related. Participants in the focus group research shared how the SNA role involves much more than supporting the students' primary care needs. Many indicated they provide significant support for other needs. Examples provided included supporting wellbeing, assistance with behaviours of concern and support for learning.

SNAs, school leaders and teachers indicated the role of the SNA is broader than that set out in Circular 30/2014. This view was shared by members of the Working Groups. It was generally agreed that the role is no longer just supporting primary care needs as set out in the relevant circular, but that SNAs play an important role in assisting students to access the curriculum and assisting students where they become dysregulated. Other examples provided included helping a student to stay on task and supporting learning by repeating the teachers' instructions. It was also noted by participants in the focus groups that SNAs help with assistive technology, praise work completed and encourage students to engage in class.

Students endorsed this view in the consultation with CYP where they reported a very positive contribution from the SNAs to their whole school experience. They described the role of the SNA as primarily a caring role but indicated the SNA also provides support for the teacher in the classroom and emotional support for students. They listed yard supervision as an important aspect of the role where the SNA can act as mediator and problem solver and contribute to making the yard a safe space for all students. They also identified the role of SNAs in the whole school community helping with various activities and school events such as after school clubs and school events such as Halloween, the Christmas play and 'Jersey day'.

4.12 Exploring changes to the role

During the collaborative phase of the Plan there was discussion in the working group around whether the SNA role should change to a teaching assistant role. The group considered evidence around the role of teaching assistants in other jurisdictions and the effect of this role on teaching and learning outcomes for students.

Notably, the 2018 Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistance Scheme by the NCSE[27] found that, although SNAs may assist teachers with the delivery of class teaching, curriculum differentiation should fundamentally be the role of qualified teachers. National and international research in this area also supports this approach.

In the UK, Blatchford and colleagues, in the *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) Project* (2003–2008)[28], found significant negative evidence regarding the impact of teaching assistants on the academic progress of pupils. The DISS project, the largest study of its kind in the UK, found that children who received the most support from teaching assistants made significantly less progress than similar pupils who received less or no support.

27 NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 6 – Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme – March 2018.

28 Microsoft Word – EDTA project FINAL REPORT.doc.

A study on SNAs in the context of pupil independence by Griffin and Blatchford[29] found that the main focus of SNA support for learning related to task completion rather than task quality or pupil understanding. The researchers highlighted potential for the future direction of the SNA role through focusing explicitly on a scaffolding role between the teachers' skill-based input and the child's independent functioning to support inclusive education.

This research is also supported by further evidence set out in the Scoping Literature Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants conducted by DCU. The research highlighted key concerns regarding the overuse of teaching assistants leading to unintended negative consequences, such as reduced teacher engagement, social separation in classrooms, interference with peer interactions, increased student dependence, stigmatisation, limited access to qualified instruction, and a loss of autonomy or identity (Giangreco, 2021). The scoping review reinforced that paraprofessionals should act under the supervision of qualified teachers, with clearly defined and focused roles. The research found that assigning paraprofessionals as the primary instructional agent negatively affected both instructional quality and student inclusion (Giangreco and Broer, 2007).

Further to consideration of research and discussion by the working group, it was agreed that the review of policy on the SNA role should not change to a teaching assistant/classroom assistant role or include any pedagogical element in the role. It was acknowledged that, while SNAs may provide support for learning as set out in Circular 0032/2026, students who require additional support for learning must receive this support in the first instance from or under the direction of the class/subject teacher or the special education teacher who are qualified to do so.

4.13 Building Readiness To Learn, Engage and Participate

It was evident from discussions with stakeholders on the SNA role in supporting learning that SNAs provide assistance to students to facilitate engagement and participation in learning. From a policy perspective the objective was to decide whether this is appropriate and in the best interest of the students. Stakeholder feedback reflected overall support for SNAs providing support for learning in principle but only under the direction and supervision of the teacher. The policy in this regard has not changed in that the SNA does not have a pedagogical function, but it is clarified that SNAs can, under the direction of the teacher, support the students' engagement and participation in learning.

During the consultation with children and young people all participants described how the SNA helps them with learning. Examples of such support come in the form of repeating instructions, helping to take notes, assistance with pronunciation of difficult words and help with reading and spelling by prompting the student. Some other students described how the SNA takes the time to repeat or break down a question or topic thus ensuring that the student understands before they write anything down.

The scoping review showed that the SNA role in supporting learning can benefit students by enhancing their learning and independence in school. However, such support can present chanllenges, and care should be taken that such support is always under the supervision and direction of the teacher and that those students with the most need have access to teachers with appropriate expertise.

29 "Give them Wings to Fly: Critiquing the Special Needs Assistant scheme through the lens of pupil independence" by Claire Griffin and Peter Blatchford (2021).

Parents of children and young people with special educational needs were invited to present to the working group and share their experiences of SNA support. These parents concurred that the SNA role should not be limited to meeting physical care needs but that they may have a role in supporting students to access learning.

It is essential, in the best interests of the students, that the SNA and the teacher have an understanding of each of their roles in the classroom. Circular 32/2026 sets out the policy in relation to the SNA role in support for learning. It clarifies that the teacher holds the primary responsibility for the learning and personal development of all students in the class, including those with special educational needs. SNAs can provide supplemental, teacher-directed support and assistance with non-instructional tasks to enable students to participate in learning.

SNA support for learning should always be designed by and delivered under the supervision of the teacher. The SNA role in support for learning must not include teaching new concepts, skills or knowledge to students.

The SNA role in support for learning can include:

- Supporting the student to generalise skills being developed, by reinforcing student learning using approaches directed by the teacher. This might include, for example, supporting communication through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).
- Implementing visual supports and schedules as directed by the teacher. Visual schedules help show the student what is happening and when it will happen, thus providing a predictable routine that can reduce anxiety and promote independence.
- Supporting the student with independent living and functional life skills, behaviour and social and emotional wellbeing.
- Helping students to engage with and to stay on task in lessons, where needed. This is under the direction of the teacher and always with the aim of supporting the student to develop the skills necessary to become independent in his/her learning. This support may gradually withdraw as the student gains competence, depending on the student's emerging needs.
- Supporting inclusive participation – assisting students in accessing whole-class and whole-school activities and routines. This may include support for students during lessons by clarifying tasks, prompting, reinforcing instructions, and maintaining attention.
- Supporting the teacher with a student's regulation and readiness to learn – this must be based on identified needs and can involve:
  - Assisting students to understand the content provided by the teacher. This should take precedence over task completion which can hinder deeper learning and independence.
  - Supporting the whole class, promoting inclusive practices alongside their support of students with core care needs.

As SNAs are providing support for learning to students, stakeholders agreed that such support should be acknowledged as part of the role of SNAs in the updated circular on the SNA role. Such support for learning should only occur where the core care needs of students have been met and must only be done strictly under the direction and supervision of the teacher.

4.14 Student Support Planning

Feedback from SNAs and other stakeholders indicates there are inconsistencies in the level of input from SNAs to care planning and review for the students they support.

Discussion in the collaborative working group pointed to the importance of the SNAs contribution to student support planning, particularly as it relates to care needs. The SNA has a unique relationship with the student and can often provide useful information and feedback to inform planning.

It was agreed that SNAs should have access to relevant information to ensure they are aware of particular interventions for students, are positioned to deliver support which is consistent with those interventions and can provide relevant input on how strategies are working. SNA participation in student support meetings was also seen as essential to delivering effective support to students with special educational needs.

To carry out their roles effectively and provide the best outcomes for students, it is essential that the SNA and teacher collaborate on care planning.[30] This collaboration should involve agreeing on an approach, setting targets, and sharing progress for each student. This includes discussion on behaviours of concern and how these can potentially be avoided. This will contribute to a calmer, more structured learning environment, conducive to uninterrupted teaching time and effective learning for all students in the class.

Circular 30/2014 reflects this position and includes as a duty of an SNA – *Assistance with the development of Personal Pupil Plans for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on developing a care plan to meet the care needs of the pupil concerned and the review of such plans.*

4.15 Regulation

Findings from the focus groups pointed to concerns around the effective use of movement breaks to help with emotional regulation and their impact on learning time. It is acknowledged that, even where a whole-class approach is taken, there may be times when an individual student must be withdrawn, and these interventions prevent disruption for the class. However, the SNA should be appropriately trained in techniques to ensure maximum effect and to minimise the duration of movement breaks. The help and support with regulation provided by the SNA is a significant benefit to school communities. In addition to supporting the individual student it allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning and supports readiness to learn in a classroom which is a calm supportive environment. It is critically important that SNAs are supported through relevant training and a whole school approach to meeting students' needs.

It is important to note that, in parallel with the ongoing work on the Plan the department published the guidelines for schools on *Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations*[31]. These guidelines were developed to address uncertainty for staff on how to respond when facing crisis situations where there are concerns regarding physical safety. They focus on creating inclusive environments which can respond to need and build on good practice including prevention and de-escalation. Training has also been provided to support implementation of the Guidelines in schools.[32]

30 Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations.

31 Ibid.

32 Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations – Update on Training, and Monitoring and Oversight arrangements.

Regulation strategies should be based on guidelines set out in the Department's *Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations* and the NCSE's *Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Physical-Classroom Environment*. It is important that these tools and strategies are used appropriately, in the best interest of all the students in the class.

4.16 Fostering Independence

SNAs play a vital role in providing additional support which is focused on the development of students' independence to help them to learn, develop and reach their full potential. Working alongside the teacher, school leaders and the school community they help to create and maintain an inclusive learning environment to enable students to develop skills, build their confidence and navigate learning challenges.

This support is vital to equip the student with the necessary skills to reach their full potential in school, to socialise, to cope with change and transitions, including between class and school settings and, where possible, into third level, into the workforce or onto a follow-on adult placement.

Care needs of students are not always constant but can change as students grow and develop. It is acknowledged that for some students care needs may increase over time. However, for many others care needs may diminish as they get older and as they develop both physically and emotionally. Constant planning and review are required to ensure that the student's development of independent living skills, interaction with peers and educational progress are promoted through an appropriate level of support. SNA support should account for independence and socialisation needs in the case of all students.

SNAs provide tailored support based on the individual needs of each student as set out in the student support plan. This can involve intensive, close proximity work at first, which may be gradually reduced as the student becomes more independent. Scaffolding tasks, fostering self-care, and fading support encourage students to do things for themselves, rather than the SNA completing tasks for them.

The positive impact of fostering independence is evident in the feedback from the consultation with CYP where they described how SNAs support them to achieve greater independence by providing guidance to steer them in the right direction, prompting them to make choices for themselves and giving them a sense of control. They described how SNAs encourage students to ask for help when needed instead of waiting for assistance. They also stated that the SNA provides positive reinforcement which is an important to encourage students and promote continued engagement in school life. Individual students provided feedback including that the SNA helps them with the bathroom when needed, helps to get books from their bag, takes away tables and other obstacles to clear a path for them, helps when they can't see the board, lets them figure out things on their own.

One student comment in particular set out in the report on the consultation highlights positive SNA support that also supports the student's independence:

> *"[The SNA] helps me to be independent and do things by myself as I am senior. I go for a walk with my friends without our SNAs. I get to play air hockey and I have fun."*

While it is evident that there are positive results from strategic, planned fostering of independence for students with special educational needs, it can be seen from research and empirical evidence that this is not always the practice in Irish schools. The 2025 literature scoping review advises that "While Circular 0030/2014 cautions against SNA support creating a culture of over-dependency, over-shadowing and creating barriers to social engagement with peers or development of independent living skills, findings from this review illustrate that there is a clear theme of over-reliance evident within the Irish education system."

In an Irish study of the preparedness and deployment of SNAs when supporting pupils' behavioural care needs and independence development in mainstream primary schools (Griffin O'Brien, 2018), it was noted that "consideration must be given to matters related to pupil proximity and pupil prompting, as well as the potential use of behavioural reward strategies to provide temporary, extrinsic support for pupils. In this way, and through a collaborative, systemic approach, pupils can be supported to develop self-management and self-regulatory skills related to learning, emotions and behaviour in their overall journey towards independence.[33]

There is a need to balance the extent of the support provided by the SNA with each student's right to acquire personal independence skills. To give them every opportunity possible to develop these independent living skills, the SNA support should always be at the minimum level, that is 'just enough support' required to meet the needs of the student.

Maintaining this balance is important to ensure that SNA support does not create over dependency or act as a barrier or intermediary between the student and the teacher or the student and their peers, in situations where direct SNA support it is not required.

The SNA can work alongside the teacher to encourage and empower students by allowing them, where appropriate and in line with their individual abilities as set out in their student support plan, to take on manageable tasks and to build confidence and self-esteem.

The alternative would be to provide more SNA support than is required, where a student might be overly shadowed or constantly monitored by the SNA. Research[34] shows that this can lead to social isolation, frustration, feelings of exclusion and can act as a barrier to a student achieving independent living skills.

The framework for deployment set out in the Literature scoping review states that promoting student independence is a key component of the role encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, behavioural and physical dimensions. It recommends that SNAs should encourage students to take ownership of their work. The negative impact on development of independence is shown when SNAs have not been appropriately prepared with evidence-informed skills that aid support fading for example scaffolding, effective prompting and prompt fading. It is noted that students can become dependent on the SNA and fail to make adequate progress in independent skills when appropriate scaffolding for support and support fading is not employed. It also shows that students with disabilities can become separated from their peers through inappropriate SNA deployment.

In the above context it is essential that students receive 'just enough support' and that SNAs are supported through appropriate training to deliver a balanced approach which fosters independence.

33 Griffin-O'Brien_fostering independence_thesis.pdf

34 Scoping Review of the Role of Special Needs Assistants /TeachingAssistants /Paraprofessionals – A report for the Department of Education and Youth to support work on the first SNA Workforce Development Plan (JTravers,TCarolan,LConnolly,NKenny, ALogan, SNic Aindriú -DCU Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy (2025).

4.17 Dignity and Respect

An SNA promotes promotes a student's dignity by providing support that is respectful, empathetic, and unobtrusive, while fostering independence through systematic strategies that gradually reduce the student's reliance on them. The primary goal of the SNA is to provide the minimum level of support required to meet care needs, ensuring the student can participate fully in school life as an individual.

The SNAs presence should be respectful of the student's autonomy. They should be available when needed but not obtrusive. The SNA role in supporting the student should ensure that they do not create a barrier to social engagement with peers.

Every child and young person who has the capacity to do so, has a right to express their views in relation to matters that affect them and to have these views taken into consideration, in line with their age and maturity. This is an important consideration for student support planning and particularly around the care that the student receives in school. They should have a voice in planning and strategies formed for their support in school.

The SNA must ensure that support and care is student-centred, promotes the student's safety and welfare, wellbeing and dignity so that they can participate to the best of their abilities in school. This aspect of the SNA role permeates all of their interactions with the student. This includes communication, treatment of personal information, fostering their independence while ensuring their care and safety and upholding their dignity.

Student dignity is an important consideration, in particular, in relation to intimate care needs and should be balanced against the need to foster independence and the student's capacity for change. There is a need for consideration and planning around job rotation of SNAs in this context. Any change should balance the student's need and capacity for independence with the benefits of promoting resilience and adapting to change.

In line with the student's goals as set out in their student support plan, the care support from the SNA should at all times be respectful, empathetic, and unobtrusive. In line with the SSP the SNA should, where appropriate, encourage independence by gradually reducing the student's reliance on them. The primary goal of the SNA is to provide the correct level of support required to meet care needs, ensuring the student can participate as fully as possible in school life.

One particular quote from the consultation with children and young people encompasses best practice in the SNA role, providing care and support while maintaining independence and dignity:

> *"I've had [this SNA's] help all of the time. Helps me to be more independent. I have had the same SNA since first year. When I was in first year, [the SNA] was with me all the time. Now I am in 6th year, and [the SNA] lets me do stuff myself. I can do what I want in the yard, and [the SNA] is nearby if [needed]. [The SNA] also just goes with me to the bathroom door now and I will only call if I need [help]. He is teaching/helping me to become more independent. He is getting me ready for college and for life out of school and out in the world."*

4.18 Meeting Communication Needs

SNAs can provide significant tailored support to students with communication difficulties under the direction of the teacher.

The purpose is always to help the student share and understand messages and the chosen method of communication can depend on what works best for their skills and abilities.

Communication in terms of the interaction between the SNA and the student includes verbal and non-verbal methods of receiving and giving information. Effective communication is an essential element of the SNA role in supporting students who have difficulty or cannot communicate at all through speech. Effective communication can take the form of patience and understanding, reading non-verbal cues, body language, facial expressions and responding through speech or using an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

The literature scoping review procured for the Plan documents the positive results from paraprofessionals trained in communication supporting students with special educational needs. This includes empirical research which showed that training paraeducators in communication support strategies led to positive changes in the communication behaviours of both the paraeducators and the AAC users (Douglas 2012).[35] A systematic review of 13 single case studies by Brock and Carter (2013) found that paraprofessionals can successfully deliver systematic instructional interventions, including prompting strategies and augmentative communication supports, that promote life skills for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The SNA can assist students to learn to communicate with the help of AAC which in turn increases the student's independence as it upholds their right to communicate their needs and feelings and enables them to have a voice in the school community.

SNAs work as part of a whole school approach to promote social communication by modelling interactions, creating inclusive opportunities and supporting peer to peer connections for the student, aligned with the social and communication preferences of the student being supported.

4.19 Communicating through Irish Sign Language (ISL)

Circular 72/2025 sets out the role of the ISL Specialist Classroom Support (ISL-SCS) who supports the inclusion of students attending mainstream schools who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and whose primary mode of communication and language is ISL. This scheme is in addition to the role of SNA with ISL who support students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and whose primary mode of communication and language is ISL. As set out in the circular, it is that anticipated over time, the role of the SNA with ISL competency will be fully replaced by the ISL Specialist Classroom Support (ISL-SCS).

35 Douglas, S. N. (2012). Teaching Paraeducators to Support the Communication of Individuals Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication: A Literature Review. Current Issues in Education, 15(1). https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/906.

The ISL Adviser will support the development of a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing whose primary mode of communication and language is ISL. They will provide a programme of professional learning for all members of the school community and support them to meet the needs of those students. They also support and upskill the school community, including the SNAs in ISL to enable them to support the students to achieve their best educational outcomes, have positive learner experiences and to assist them to make progress in line with their abilities. They also have a role in supporting the school and other professionals in planning for the effective transition of students moving from one education setting to the next.

4.20 School Transport Escort as an Additional Role

There was discussion by the Working Groups around challenges which may arise when the SNA also takes on a school transport escort role. For example, the SNA may not be available for reception and dispersal of students (other than the student(s) they are escorting) with special educational needs as required in their role description and employment contract. This is particularly problematic where there is no other SNA in the classroom or school who can step in to fulfil this duty.

The SNA's absence from student support meetings (which in special schools frequently take place immediately after the school day) while carrying out escort duties was cited as another challenge.

However, it was noted that such challenges only arise in exceptional cases. As the employer, the board of management will make the decision to appoint to a dual role (SNA and school transport escort) and should plan to manage these challenges with a view to ensuring students with special educational needs are appropriately supported. It was acknowledged that recruitment challenges associated with the school transport escort role may leave no alternative but to employ an SNA to the role.

4.21 Supporting Students During Hospital Stays

Hospital schools allow children to continue their education while they're staying in hospital. These schools provide a vital service, offering a full programme of learning in classrooms and by CYP's bedsides.

Hospital schools are designated by the department as special schools and serve the needs of a broad range of students of various ages and abilities.

The new hospital school being established at the National Children's Hospital Ireland (NCHI) will bring together and build on the strengths of the four existing hospital schools currently located at the Children's Health Ireland (CHI) hospitals at Temple Street, Crumlin, and Tallaght and at Beaumont Hospital. All paediatric services under CHI will transition from their current locations to the NCHI, bringing these services together under one stateoftheart facility. The new hospital school, under the patronage of the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) will provide enhanced educational support for CYP during their care.

The SNA role in the hospital school is concentrated on the care and safe movement of students with mobility needs. The SNA supports these children ensuring that they can attend class, where possible, particularly those on longer term stays, to ensure that they don't have gaps in their education that they have to catch up on when they leave hospital. Assisting these patients to attend class alongside other children and young people in hospital care can also help them to feel less isolated and can help with providing a sense of normality and consistency in an unfamiliar and often uncertain environment.

4.22 Contracted Hours Outside of Classroom Time

Under the terms of the standard employment contract set out in Circular 12/05 and Circular 15/05, SNAs are required to be available for a number of days at the start and finish of each school term, not exceeding 12 in total.

Circular 71/2011 set out the terms of the agreement that were made as part of the Croke Park negotiations whereby it was agreed to convert the 12 days to 72 hours (pro-rata for part-time SNAs). The circular did not change the terms and conditions of SNAs or amend previous agreements, and no additional hours were required of SNAs under the 2011 agreement.

It was agreed at that time that these 72 hours would be used by schools as an additional bank of hours to be utilised and delivered outside of normal school opening hours and/or the normal school year. Both the original 2005 agreement and the Croke Park provisions were negotiated and agreed nationally between the department, management bodies and trade unions.

Remuneration for the 12 days or 72 hours is included as part of the normal salary paid to an SNA under the terms of the 2005 agreed contract. As part of the 2011 agreement on reconfiguration, it was agreed that the scheduling of the hours is at the discretion of school management and schools were informed that they should ensure that accurate records are kept in relation to their use.

During the focus groups with SNAs, school leaders and teachers, concerns were expressed, in the main, over the inconsistent use of the 72 hours. Most participants stated that circular 71/2011 is unclear which has led to potential misuse of the 72 hours in some cases and overall inconsistency as to how they are applied in schools. Research in preparation for the Plan indicates some understand this time to be "non-contact" where there is no interaction with students, teachers, or parents. However, it was clarified that relevant circulars do not define this time as 'non-contact.'

Feedback indicated there are challenges around the duties recorded for the 72 hours including assignment of inappropriate tasks. Some school leaders indicated they are unclear on how they should implement and record the 72 hours.

The working group on the review and development of the SNA role considered all aspects of the 72 hours including the challenges faced by SNAs and school leaders with planning, assigning and completing the hours. It was broadly agreed that SNAs cannot carry out all duties or complete training necessary to be effective in their role during classroom hours. An alternative approach to this time was considered and agreed upon by the working group.

4.23 Time for Learning and Development

Time for learning and development was seen as critically important given the range of needs which a SNA may be required to support. Consequently, the working group agreed this merits a dedicated allocation of time to ensure SNAs are appropriately skilled and competent to meet the needs of the students in their care. The learning and development time is allocated for essential SNA training, development and upskilling and must be completed outside of normal classroom hours to ensure that the SNA can complete essential training and will be available to provide necessary support to students.

4.24 School Community Time

Time is also required to complete important duties essential to delivering effective support to students. It was agreed that the key duties to be undertaken during this time are assisting with developing and reviewing the student care plans and attending relevant meetings.

Following detailed discussion in the working group it was agreed that this essential work should be described as "School Community Time". Examples of effective use of this time include:

- Attendance at staff meetings.
- Parent Teacher meetings, where appropriate.
- Meetings with the special education team on Student Support Plans.
- Assisting with planning for transitions.
- Preparing materials for class.
- Review meetings.

4.25 Post-primary Sector School Year

SNAs in the post-primary sector are contracted to work during the month of June on examinations and work appropriate to the grade and to complete any appropriate or necessary training. It is a matter for school management as their employer to determine the specific work that is to be completed by SNAs during the month of June, in accordance with Circular 0032/2026, which sets out the SNA role and duties.

Consultation in preparation for the Plan highlighted that in some instances SNAs are rostered for the work during this period without appropriate work or training scheduled for them. Conversely focus group research with SNAs in preparation for the Plan indicates time is the greatest barrier for SNAs to engage with learning and development. Discussion focused on lack of time available or allocated for training often resulting in SNAs completing training in their own time, which impacted on their work/life balance.

Examples of good practice were shared where SNAs availed of training and upskilling opportunities in June when they were not required for exam duties or other scheduled duties consistent with their role.

It is evident that there is scope for more effective use of time in June in the post-primary sector. June provides an opportunity for preparation for the coming school year through for example, planning transitions for outgoing or incoming students, asssistance with care planning and review.

4.26 SNA as a Member of the Whole School Community

As the SNA workforce has grown the SNA role has become embedded in school communities, providing support which is greatly valued. Furthermore, SNAs have a unique perspective on students which is an important factor in delivering a positive educational experience and outcome for students. It is essential that SNAs have opportunities to share this input.

Stakeholder feedback indicates there is an inconsistent approach by schools around attendance by SNAs at school meetings. The working group on review and development of the SNA role agreed that regular team meetings are essential for care planning and review. It was agreed that it is good practice to include SNAs in multi-disciplinary team meetings where possible and appropriate, as this will provide a comprehensive view of the student. These meetings can provide a shared understanding of the student which facilitates decision making in the student's best interests.

Appropriate communication with SNAs promotes best practice, builds trust and mitigates workplace challenges. It is a critical requirement for delivering effective support for students that SNAs have access to relevant information and an opportunity to provide input to school planning. This can involve the SNA partaking in meetings around planning schedules, timetables, training and other relevant activities.

In addition to their collaborative role in the SSP and matters directly related to their caring role, SNAs should attend and participate in school meetings related to their role or the whole school community. SNAs attendance at relevant staff meetings is essential to promote respect and inclusion for the SNA workforce and to contribute to a cohesive and collaborative school community which delivers the best educational experience for students.

4.27 Job Rotation

Positive relationships between students and school staff contribute significantly to wellbeing, emotional resilience, self-worth, and improved behaviour. As students' progress along their journey through school, they often develop strong bonds with SNAs which enhance their sense of security and belonging. While the advantages of the relationships that SNAs build up with students are evident from the research carried out with stakeholders in the focus groups, the scoping review explores the dangers of over-reliance. The review notes that the empirical literature reviewed consistently cautions against over-reliance, particularly through sustained one-to-one support models. "Although originally designed to facilitate access to learning, one-to-one arrangements can, if poorly managed, inadvertently undermine student independence, restrict peer interaction, and create long-term barriers to educational engagement.

The working group considered the merits of job rotation for SNAs. Approaches to rotation in various settings were discussed, including the impact of change on certain students. Regular rotation of SNAs between mainstream and special class was considered good practice for SNAs and students. A split-week approach was considered by some to help students to become accustomed to planned change and not to become over-reliant on an individual SNA. This approach to deployment of SNA support can help to build the student's confidence, reducing the impact of unexpected change such as when a SNA is on leave or otherwise unavailable.

However, in some cases, this approach of students working with different staff members can prove to be too disruptive and, in these cases, yearly rotation of staff with a transition period may be a more appropriate approach.

Rotation can be very effective when planned and managed effectively. It can be of great benefit to the SNA who gains experience and knowledge working in different settings and can have significant benefits for the student. Rotating SNAs in post-primary school has the potential to build students' independence and social and emotional skills reducing their dependence on one SNA and preparing them for life after school.

Feedback from focus groups indicated that rotation of SNAs from special classes into mainstream classes increased SNAs experience and knowledge and helped to mitigate against burnout in the role. Some participants reported a reluctance among some staff in mainstream to rotate to or take up a role in a special class. Other feedback indicated that some SNAs were reluctant to take up a role in a special school or in the post-primary sector. It was agreed by the working group that this may be due to lack of confidence and that training including on working with teenagers and on the practical aspects of working with CYP with autism and those with more complex needs would assist along with strategic rotation and deployment of SNAs in mainstream schools.

In general, rotation of SNAs in school is considered best practice once the need to promote independence is considered in the context of the impact of change on certain students.

Chapter 5

Pillar 2 Establishment of a Quality Framework

5.1 Investing in Quality

To achieve the vision of the SNA Workforce Development Plan it is vital that the support provided by the SNA workforce aligns with best practice and that SNAs are supported to provide the very best service to children and young people. The establishment of the SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) by the department in 2022 was the initial step in developing a strategic framework for the SNA workforce, focused on high-standard care, learning and development, and developing student independence.

The first of the department's strategic goals as set out in the current department Statement of Strategy (SoS), Inclusive Education for All[36], is to deliver a learning experience for students to the highest international standards. The objectives to achieve this goal include promoting high quality practice and providing quality assurance through implementation of a responsive programme of school and setting inspections and educational advice, and by supporting the development of school self-evaluation processes.

Pillar 2 of the SNA Workforce Development Plan responds to the need for measures to support a high-quality SNA service. Proposals include setting inspections and providing guidance to schools, supporting school self-evaluation processes, sharing learning and good practice and working with evidence from research and international best practice.

Recommendations under this pillar of the Plan will build on and enhance policy, processes and procedures, strengthen oversight, and promote best practice to maintain and improve the quality of the SNA service in schools. Effective arrangements for monitoring and reviewing service provision will help achieve the best outcomes for students with special educational needs. This will also increase transparency and consistency in schools and respond to the expectation in school communities that the SNA service provides high quality support. These actions align with the department's SoS objective to "continue to make policy decisions which produce the best educational outcomes for children and young people and which are fiscally sustainable".

5.2 Consultation

In the research and analysis phase of the Plan, it became apparent that there are varying practices and approaches to the SNA role across the primary, post-primary and special school sector. To a certain extent this is not unexpected given schools are individual workplaces, and it can be seen that the SNA role responds to the needs of the children supported. However, feedback from all stakeholder groups indicates the need for greater clarity around many aspects of the SNA role and duties can lead to challenges. Examples include the need for greater understanding of the importance of balancing an appropriate level of support with promoting independence and the need for students to be directly involved in planning and reviewing the approach to their SNA support. In this context measures to increase clarity and build good practice are merited. Work under Pillar 1 of the Plan including the new circular on the role of the SNA will assist in building clarity while actions under Pillar 3 Establishment of a Learning and Development Programme will build knowledge, understanding of best practice.

36 https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE_strategy.pdf – Inclusive education for all Department of Education and Youth Statement of Strategy 2025–2028.

5.3 Collaboration

There was consensus in the Working Groups on the importance of developing a quality framework to provide clarity on the SNA role and duties within the school community, to align and update policies and procedures, and to support schools in ensuring consistency across the primary, special and post-primary school sectors. The work completed by the working group also takes into account that quality control is not just a one-time activity, it is an ongoing process that needs to be monitored and evaluated to ensure it is achieving its goals.

Work on this pillar of the Plan focussed on developing structures and processes to guide schools and SNAs. The objective is to define standards and establish strategies for continuous review and self-assessment. This iterative process will involve continuous monitoring, identifying areas for improvement, implementing changes, and verifying results with a view to ensuring high standards are achieved and maintained across the service.

The aim is to provide information and guidance to schools which will help schools maintain quality by taking stock, identifying any gaps and strengths, planning, monitoring progress and reviewing. This strategy will provide information, transparency and consistency in this area, which will also motivate and empower the SNA workforce to learn and develop and build on their strengths.

5.4 To regulate or not to regulate?

Regulation of a workforce sets standards for professional conduct, education, and training, and ensures that the registered professionals maintain their skills through continuing professional development. It aims to protect the public by mitigating risks and ensuring a safe and effective service.

Ireland maintains a system of professional regulation across many occupations. In the health and social care professions, nurses and midwives are regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI), Pharmacists are regulated by the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI). in the legal profession solicitors are regulated by the Law Society of Ireland. Regulatory bodies were established to set minimum standards of practice for these professions to ensure fairness, professionalism and public protection.

SNAs are not required to register with a regulatory body in relation to their employment in recognised schools. In general, when a profession is regulated, there is a requirement for the worker to hold a specific level of education to access the profession or register with the regulatory body before they can practice in that profession. The base requirement for most regulated bodies in Ireland's health and social care sectors is generally an approved NFQ (National Frameword of Qualifications) Level 7 qualification. While proposals are in place under the Plan to raise the current minimum educational requirement for entry to an SNA post to an approved NFQ Level 6 qualification, it will take some time for this level to be achieved across the workforce.

For these reasons It was agreed by the working group that regulation of the workforce should not be pursued under this Plan.

5.5 The Right Touch

The working group considered alternatives such as right touch regulation as a more appropriate alternative to adopting a stringent regulatory framework for the SNA profession in the longer term. This would avoid placing any unnecessary conforming obligations on SNAs while maintaining an overview of quality, evidence-based risk management, consistency and good practice in the SNA workforce.

Factors taken into consideration include the move toward alternatives to regulation in recent years based on international research in this area. Strict regulatory requirements can be an unnecessary burden in some professions, providing excessive control which can result in a waste of resources, false assurances and a barrier to innovation and growth. In many cases it can be seen that alternative, less rigorous strategies can be employed to ensure an effective and accountable service. This has been reflected in some Irish institutions and how they approach regulating professional workforces.

'Right touch regulation' is a term coined by the head of the UK's Professional Standards Authority (PSA). It proposes an approach that is proportionate, consistent, targeted, transparent and accountable. It aims to ensure that the public is protected, while allowing sufficient autonomy and innovation.

This approach is underpinned by principles which state that regulation should aim to be:

- **Proportionate:** Regulators should only intervene when necessary. Remedies should be appropriate to the risk and costs identified and minimised.
- **Consistent:** Rules and standards must be joined up and implemented fairly.
- **Targeted:** Regulation should be focused on the problem and minimise side effects.
- **Transparent:** Regulators should be open and keep regulations simple and user-friendly.
- **Accountable:** Regulators must be able to justify decisions and be subject to public scrutiny.
- **Agile:** Regulation must look forward and be able to adapt to anticipate change.

The measures to achieve quality in the SNA workforce including the actions to achieve quality set out in this chapter which have been designed to ensure appropriate, achievable standards are in place and are reviewed and monitored. This includes the publication of the new circular on the role of the SNA (Circular 32/2026) to provide clarity and consistency for the whole school community on the SNA role and duties, the practice guidelines to include indicators of effective practice which clearly set out standards to be achieved and maintained and the increased inspection and reporting.

5.6 Quality and inclusion

UNESCO notes that inclusion and quality are fundamentally intertwined concepts and that an inclusive system is one where all children and young people can access supportive, engaging and appropriately challenging learning experiences that enable them to have daily life-enhancing encounters and support them to progress through the stages of the education system and fulfil their potential[37].

The department acknowledges that provision for inclusive education must be supported and monitored on a regular basis at both the individual education setting level and system level to ensure that barriers impeding the child or young person's right to access and participate in an education appropriate to their needs and abilities are eliminated.[38] The SNA role is fundamental to supporting students in this system through their support for care needs, support for learning and independence and their role in the whole school community fostering a holistic school environment to ensure inclusion and participation for all students.

The quality framework under pillar 2 will set out indicators of effective practice and strategies to support SNAs and schools in implementing clear and consistent practices that ensure a high-quality service and foster an inclusive school culture among staff and students. This will include guidance for schools and SNAs in promoting inclusion and supporting a positive learning experience for all students.

The combined components of the quality framework, which includes crossover of work under other pillars of the Plan, including clarity on the role under Pillar 1 and learning and development under Pillar 3, will build on the vision for SNAs to be supported and respected within an inclusive whole school community, while recognising that this will be an on-going, iterative process.

5.7 Actions to achieve quality

5.7.1 Review and redraft relevant departmental policy and procedures

To promote and enhance the quality of the SNA service, updated policies and procedures that align with legislation, associated policy and best practice are essential. Accordingly, several actions in the Plan focus on policy areas where review and updating of existing policies are recommended. Actions include:

- Review of circular 30/2014 and 71/2011 with a view to publishing a new circular to clarify the SNA role and duties.
- Review of circulars 12/2005 (primary) and 15/2005 (post-primary) to update the SNA employment contracts.

37 1 UNESCO (2009). Policy guidelines on inclusion in education; 2009 – 177849eng.pdf (unesco.org) p. 8.
38 Reflections on inclusion in the Irish education system.

5.7.2 Review of circular on SNA role and duties

Stakeholder feedback during the research phase of the Plan consistently highlighted the need for current circulars to address the evolved role of the SNA and address the varying practices and approaches to the SNA role across schools. Feedback overall emphasised the need for greater clarity and a more informative, updated, and structured policy framework in this area.

The work under Pillar 1 to review and redraft departmental circular 0030/2014 on the role and duties of the SNA, incorporating provisions from the departmental circular 0071/2011 along with the accompanying guidance document, improve clarity and direction for SNAs and the whole school community. These documents have been developed in collaboration with stakeholders and based on significant research into best practice.

5.7.3 SNA employment contract

The review of the SNA employment contract under Pillar 4 of the Plan involves an update of provisions in the existing SNA employment contract to comply with current employment legislation and align with other work on the Plan. New circulars including template contracts replace the previous circulars 05/2005 and 12/2005. A guidance document to provide information on the new documents is also provided.

5.7.4 Inspection and review

The department's Inspectorate division works to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all children and young people in education settings from birth to eighteen years and to support the development of the Irish education system.[39] The overarching mission of the Inspectorate is to provide for quality assurance of the Irish education system experienced by CYP. The inclusion, wellbeing and safeguarding of children and young people are core purposes in the Inspectorate's work.

The Inspectorate inspects recognised primary, post-primary schools, special schools and other educational settings. Through the evidence gathered during school inspection visits, the Inspectorate evaluates and reports on the quality of educational provision to promote improved learning outcomes and experiences for all children and young people[40].

The Inspectorate recognises the importance of the SNA role in the school community and work has commenced on reporting on this work in special school evaluations. This will be widened to include other inspections/other areas where feasible to do so.

The Inspectorate's new wellbeing promotion model of evaluation includes SNA surveys and meetings, aligning with the four pillars of wellbeing (culture and environment/curriculum/relationships and partnerships/policy and planning. The Inspectorate is also examining procedures to determine how elements of the work of SNAs to support the inclusion, access and participation of children and young people with special educational needs in their learning may be incorporated into school evaluations and inspections.

39 Department of Education Statement of Strategy, 2023–2025
40 The Inspectorate and inspection 2021–2023

5.7.5 SNA Practice guidelines

SNA practice guidelines are an essential component of the quality framework under Pillar 2 of the Plan – to ensure safe, consistent, evidence-based, and high-quality care. They will reduce unwanted variations in practice, assist with decision-making, and set a standard for performance. The primary goal in developing practice guidelines for the SNA service is to inform, guide and assist schools and SNAs to support and maintain quality in the service, ultimately improving student experiences and outcomes. The practice guidelines will provide SNAs, school leaders and the wider school community with guidance and clarity on how this can be achieved.

The "Looking at our Schools" (LAOS) quality framework, published in 2022, includes a set of standards for schools to evaluate their performance in two key areas: teaching and learning and leadership and management. The working group under Pillar 2 noted that, while LAOS is a valuable resource for schools, it does not have a specific focus on the role of the SNA. It was therefore agreed that an action should be included in the Plan to develop a complementary document to support the work of SNAs.

Benchmarks and best-practice guidance set out in the guidelines will support SNAs and schools in achieving high-quality outcomes. The focus will be on setting standards, promoting continuous improvement, and developing learning, knowledge and skills to benefit SNAs. In turn, this will benefit the experience and outcomes of the CYP they support.

The SNA practice framework is designed as a developmental tool to help schools and SNAs to follow best practice, identify areas for growth, and to ensure consistent, effective service delivery.

The guidelines will:

- Build on the Looking at our Schools (LAOS) framework.
- Consolidate documentation on SNA policy and procedures.
- Provide a clear set of standards and a structured approach for schools.
- Act as a central resource for SNAs, schools, parents, and students to access this information and the tools for effective practice.
- Guide SNAs in promoting inclusion and supporting positive learning experiences for students.
- Offer SNAs a resource to reflect on their work, identify strengths and areas for development, and consider their training needs.
- Inform decision-making for SNAs, teachers and school leaders.
- Support consistency in practice across schools.
- Provide structure and direction for completing tasks and achieving objectives outlined in student support plans.

- Offer clear processes, templates, and examples of effective practice to support SNAs and schools.
- Serve as a 'living document' to promote quality, consistency, transparency and accountability, that is regularly reviewed and updated to ensure it remains relevant.

The development of the practice guidelines will entail a strategic approach combining empirical research, best practice and experiential knowledge to set out quality standards for the SNA workforce. It will help to develop an overall understanding on how SNAs work and how they can be enabled to provide and sustain high quality, effective, inclusive support to the children and young people in schools across the special, primary and post-primary school sectors.

The SNA practice guidelines will, in essence, provide the 'how-to' for effective SNA service delivery. Included in the guidelines will be a range of tools for assessments and intervention, indicators of effective practice, and an accompanying SNA handbook.

5.8 Indicators of Effective Practice

Indicators of effective practice will form an essential element of the SNA practice guidelines. The technical working group responsible for developing the practice guidelines will set out the indicators of effective practice for SNAs, establishing guidelines and protocols for all key actions and responsibilities.

These indicators are vital to set out the requirements for performance, quality, and development in the SNA service. They provide definite measurable standards that help define what success looks like and guide the implementation of evidence-based strategies.

The indicators of effective practice will be used as a school planning tool to facilitate review of the SNA role in the school and to prioritise areas for development. They will address areas such as planning, collaborative goal setting, and learning and development, drawing on recently published, evidence-based strategies and frameworks including 'Autism Good Practice Guidelines for Schools', 'Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations' the 'NCSE Relate' guidelines and 'Guidelines for Primary and Post-Primary schools Supporting Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes'.

The practice guidelines will also cover the learning environment, social and emotional development, communication, academic progress, training and development, and well-being of SNAs, as well as their role within the school community and their interaction with all of the other members of the whole school community.

The guidelines will focus on the following principles guiding the SNA role:

- **Inclusion:** SNA support for diversity, inclusion and equitable access to education, fostering independence skills, and promoting engagement and participation in learning.
- **Flexibility:** Providing a flexible response to meeting student needs, working with the teacher to provide the greatest level of support for those with the greatest need, while, in parallel, fostering independence and supporting the teacher and other students where possible.
- **Providing a holistic support role in the classroom:**
  - Scaffolding learning – providing a structured support to students, enabling them to build knowledge and skills progressively until they can perform tasks independently.
  - Assisting the student, working in collaboration with the teacher.
  - Employing flexibility and goodwill as part of the whole school community.
- **Meaningful Involvement:** Ensuring that as part of a whole school approach SNAs are included in the preparation and review of student support plans, relevant school planning, and other whole-school processes, including training, where appropriate.

The practice guidelines will be developed during the implementation phase of this Plan. The development of these guidelines will be based on some of the recently published new policy developed under the Plan including departmental Circular 0032/2026 on the Role of the SNA and departmental Circular 39/2026 and Circular 40/2026 on the SNA Employment Contract.

5.8.1 SNA Handbook

Following on from the consultation process, in response to feedback from stakeholders, it was agreed by the working group that an SNA handbook would be a valuable resource, providing readily accessible information to support confidence, competence, efficiency, and effectiveness in the SNA role.

Timely provision of written information on the care needs addressed by SNAs, and on the school's approach to delivering such care, supports on-the-job learning and reduces the time required to achieve proficiency in the role. This reduces reliance on colleagues including other SNAs, the teacher and the principal, generating efficiencies and promoting best practice.

Stakeholder feedback also indicated that an SNA handbook would be particularly useful for substitute SNAs in a school on a short-term basis, helping to optimise their performance.

School management bodies have confirmed that most schools have a staff handbook in place with information on the school. However, upon researching the area it appears that the staff specific information in these handbooks is aimed primarily at teaching staff. It was agreed that the SNA handbook will be designed to complement the staff handbook used by some schools, by providing essential information and references relevant to SNA staff.

A template handbook will be included within the SNA practice guidelines document and will include information, practical advice and guidance on:

- The school and its ethos.
- School layout and classroom structure.
- Health and Safety guidelines.
- Probation.
- Continuous learning and development opportunities.
- Recording of SNA training and CPD.
- SNA role in care planning: planning and review at the start/end of the school year including time for reflection and input.
- Personal and professional conduct.
- Useful references and links including the SNA Information Hub.
- School policy and responsibilities related to Health and Safety/Child Protection /Cinéaltas/Communication/ GDPR.
- Complaints process.
- Wellbeing.

5.8.2 Complaints process

The department has commenced work to develop new school complaints procedures for student and parents. This work is being progressed as part of the Charter Guidelines that will be provided for by the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019. Subject to ongoing engagement with school management bodies and relevant trade unions, the aim is to develop a standard complaints procedure in relation to all staff, including SNAs. The Charter Guidelines, will set out the details of the complaints procedures and these will focus on dealing with complaints efficiently, effectively and, as far as possible, informally.

Chapter 6
Pillar 3

Establishment of a SNA Learning and Development Programme

6.1 Learning to Succeed

Ongoing learning and development are essential in the public sector to maintain a high performing workforce delivering a high quality service. For SNAs ongoing learning and development will enhance their skills, build confidence, and contribute to better student experience and outcomes. Regular, effective training and upskilling helps ensure that SNAs can adapt to the evolving and complex demands of their roles, support diverse student needs, and provide effective support as part of a whole school approach to the safety and wellbeing of students.

Learning improves SNAs' skills which increases their confidence, competence, and effectiveness in supporting students with diverse needs. Training and upskilling keeps them up to date on best practice and interventions, helps them build stronger relationships with students and others in the school community, and enables them to advocate effectively for the children they support ensuring their voice is heard. Ultimately, ongoing training contributes to better student outcomes as they will receive the most effective support in school to achieve their potential.

One of the three core themes in the *Public Service Transformation Framework, Workforce and Organisation of the Future*[41], the strategic plan for modernising the public service by 2030, notes that the quality and delivery of public services is heavily dependent on the skills, drive and commitment of the people who deliver them. The enthusiasm of SNAs for further training and upskilling is evident from the focus groups completed and the findings from the survey show that a significant proportion of SNAs take a proactive approach to training. However, almost one third of SNAs (27%) participating in the survey reported that they do not regularly attend training. Proposals have been developed to address this gap by supporting SNAs and school communities to by ensuring relevant, appropriate and consistent training opportunities are available and accessible. The research and proposals will also ensure that the costs and risks associated with any skill gaps in the workforce are mitigated.

6.2 Research

Significant research was undertaken in preparation for the SNA Workforce Development Plan to provide insight into the SNA role and to gather feedback on learning and development needs for this workforce. The quantitative data gained from the national survey of SNAs conducted in 2024, combined with the qualitative data from the collaboration with SNAs, school leaders, and teachers in the form of opinions, experiences and practices shared in the focus groups provides valuable insights on this topic.

The focus groups highlighted the need for a structured approach to training, beginning with a formal induction process for new SNAs. This is viewed as an essential element to fast-track progression to proficiency in a new post, given the practical and frontline nature of the SNA role.

41 better-public-services-public-service-transformation-2030-strategy.pdf

During the consultation process, many SNAs reported that they sourced their own specific targeted information and training. Concerns were raised about the validity of some of these courses, as well as the costs associated. It also became clear that some SNAs were not aware of available supports, such as Education Support Centres or Middletown Centre for Autism, which provide training for SNAs.

Participants noted the value of the focus groups as an opportunity for SNAs from various school settings to meet, discuss and share information. This highlighted the potential value of communities of practice to enable SNAs to build relationships and access additional sources of information and support. The SNAs also emphasised that a structured learning and development programme would help to address their training needs.

The participants also highlighted the need for a user friendly, central, online information hub on Gov.ie for SNAs to ensure that they have access to all relevant, up to date, correct information, reference and support material in one area. This resulted in an associated recommendation in the focus group report and the setting up by the department of the successful SNA Information Hub.

The research included discussion with SNAs on the SNA National Training Programme funded by the department. There was useful feedback on potential enhancements for the course including more of an emphasis on the post-primary sector and issues attached to puberty and adolescence, the influence of social media and the escalation of teenage anxieties.

6.3 SNA National Training Programme

The national training programme for SNAs is a major educational initiative, which enhances the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs. To date approximately 3,774 SNAs have completed the national training programme and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

The 2018 Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) included a recommendation for the provision of a national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of relevant training.

Arising from this recommendation following a procurement process the department through the NCSE awarded a four-year contract to University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education to design and deliver a new national training programme from 2021 for SNAs employed in schools. This contract was subsequently extended by a further year. The programme is fully funded by the department and delivered at no cost to the SNA. This national training programme is accredited as a Level 6 Special Purpose Award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

In February 2025 reflecting the department's commitment to investment in training for the SNA workforce the department announced a €1.9m contract for the continuation of the SNA national training programme. Following a procurement process, the contract was awarded to Atlantic Technological University for continued provision of this programme from September 2025. The course is currently being run by St Angela's Campus in Lough Gill, Co. Sligo and is jointly offered between the School of Education and the School of Nursing, Health Sciences and Disability Studies at ATU St Angela's.

Feedback on the national training programme for SNAs pointed to the relevance of course content to the role of the SNA and its value in enhancing the competence of the SNA workforce. An opportunity to enhance the course through increased focus on the training needs of post-primary SNAs was conveyed and the course content was modified accordingly.

Participants also supported the addition of a practical component which was seen as appropriate given the hands-on nature of the SNA role. The value of face-to-face contact with lecturers and the opportunity to build a community of practice with other students were also highlighted. A blended approach to course delivery emerged as the optimal solution with a practical workshop delivered in regional locations which ensures the course remains accessible to as many SNAs as possible. The in-person training sessions are designed to foster communities of practice, provide SNAs with peer-to-peer learning experiences and create tangible supports for them on their learning journey.

The intake of SNAs for academic year 2025/2026 are the first cohort to complete the course under this new approach and their feedback will inform the future direction of the course.

Reflecting its value in building capacity in the SNA workforce the SNA national training programme will continue until 2028. At that point it will be subject to review by the department and the NCSE to explore its ongoing value in supporting SNAs and standardising the educational level in the SNA workforce.

6.4 Findings from Scoping Review

The scoping review on the role and duties of the SNA[42], conducted by the research team at DCU, examines published research on the role and duties of SNAs and paraprofessionals. The evidence highlights the critical importance of training and professional development, and the report outlines some key principles to guide practice in this area.

The review findings highlight the importance of learning, training, developing and upskilling and for SNAs. It was noted that SNAs receive limited induction and training and that, with appropriate training, SNAs can support academic, communication, social, emotional, behaviour and independence outcomes for students under teacher supervision.

The framework included in the report sets out recommendations around learning and development. This should be skills and competency based and delivered via coaching models which include modelling, rehearsal and feedback. A graduated and differentiated education and training programme is required that is reflective of the different roles, responsibilities, contexts, settings, student age profiles and complexity of need.

The review shows how schools can be supported to provide relevant training through the SNA information hub hosted by the department which points to available courses and other relevant references and information.

42 Scoping_Literature_Review_of_the_Role_of_Special_Needs_Assistants_.pdf

The review noted the benefits of joint learning with teachers to clarify roles and build relationships. This need was identified during the focus groups where there was feedback on instances of uncertainty and blurring of roles between SNAs and teachers. It was highlighted also that, very often, teachers would benefit from support around working with other adults in the classroom. The action plan proposes collaboration between the department, OIDE[43] and other relevant stakeholders to develop and promote training opportunities for teachers and SNAs on how to optimise their collaborative professional relationship to provide the most effective service to students.

Ongoing learning for SNAs should be tailored to identified priority needs for development in specific contexts delivered at school level. The review notes that identification of skills for inclusion in SNA training should be guided by an evidence informed framework that draws on the research literature, incorporates student voice, and considers the contextual factors and judgments of both teachers and SNAs. It recommends a specific focus on fostering student independence and preparation for life after school, framed within the school's inclusive ethos.

6.5 Standardising Entry Level SNA Courses

Stakeholder consultation and research reveals that the quality of SNA training courses offered by private providers varies greatly in terms of the length of the course, the structure of the course content, accreditation and learning outcomes.

Consistency in training standards is vital to ensure competence in the role and to maintain enhance public trust in the service. Standardising NFQ level 5 and 6 SNA courses will support effective recruitment into SNA workforce, build the confidence of SNAs and ensure they are equipped to meet the needs of the CYP they support. It provides a reliable benchmark for knowledge and skills and ensures that all participants are trained on the same core principles and practices.

QQI is the state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. Engagement with QQI in preparation for the Plan has demonstrated that private providers are not just willing but enthusiastic to deliver courses which meet the needs of SNAs and school communities. QQI will collaborate with the department to standardise courses delivered by private providers and to ensure content is aligned with the knowledge, skills and abilities needed by SNAs to perform successfully in the role. This collaboration will factor modules and learning outcomes in the SNA National programme which have been developed and reviewed to a high standard by experts. It will also ensure that courses align with Professional Award-type Descriptors set out in the QQI's published guidelines[44].

This work will be supported by a technical review group comprising relevant stakeholders established to work on the standardisation of the QQI level 5 and 6 courses awards to provide standards for consistency and to ensure that the outcomes from these courses align with the existing and evolving needs of the SNA role.

43 Oide is a national support service providing professional learning supports and services to teachers and school leaders.

44 Professional_Award-types_PS3_2014.pdf

6.6 Induction

Induction is a crucial stage in the recruitment process helping employees understand their role, their new employer and new place of work. For SNAs, an effective induction process supports their understanding of the role and the range and type of needs of students in the school. It significantly influences their integration into the school community and success in their role. Induction provides schools with an opportunity to welcome new SNAs and ensure they have the knowledge and support needed to perform effectively. It also facilitates SNAs to develop an understanding of the school's ethos.

SNAs noted that a structured induction process would support their effective integration in the school community and help to build confidence in their role.

Proposed solutions included the introduction of an induction booklet containing information on care needs and the school's approach to delivery of care support alongside, where feasible, the use of job shadowing and mentoring programmes with experienced SNAs.

The working group on the establishment of a learning and development programme comprised stakeholders including management bodies, school leaders, SNAs and trade unions. The group discussed the findings from the research phase, share their experience and views on SNA learning and development. It is generally agreed by stakeholders that a properly structured induction training process benefits SNAs, the students that they support, and the whole school community. In addition, a readily available bank of necessary, relevant, and up-to-date information facilitates competence, efficiency and effectiveness in the role. It supports an understanding of the range and type of needs in the school, equipping SNAs to respond effectively.

A standardised induction process will ensure consistency and promote best practice. It will support SNAs and school communities by improving the onboarding experience and fostering effective practice. The induction programme will also reduce the risk that new employees fail to integrate into the school community, thereby mitigating staffing challenges and potential IR problems. It supports a requirement for all entrants to the SNA workforce to complete an induction process.

The proposed induction process will follow a three-tier approach:

1. General information on public service, the structure of the education sector, pensions, leave arrangements, and other related matters.
2. Role-specific information outlining the duties and responsibilities of SNAs.
3. School-specific information tailored to the individual school context.

Tiers one and two of this three-tier approach will be supported and delivered by the department and NCSE. Tier 3 which is the responsibility of the school / BOM as the employer, will be supported through guidance and templates to standardise the induction process.

6.7 Ongoing Learning And Development

Ongoing learning and development opportunities for SNAs are critical to ensure they are supported and equipped to meet the diverse and changing needs of students

During the research and analysis phase of the Plan SNAs communicated a need for legitimate training options to be signposted as sometimes they are uncertain whether available offerings comply with best practice or department policy. Schools too expressed a need for support to identify appropriate training for SNAs.

Consideration of options to deliver such training points to the wide selection of training which is available through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the Education Support Centres (ESCs), Middletown Centre for Autism, Children's Health Ireland and advocacy groups such as Down Syndrome Ireland and Diabetes Ireland who provide training and resources to schools.

While there are many training options available there is a need for a more structured approach which matches provision with identify training needs. The action plan includes proposals for the development of a structured learning and development programme for SNAs working with and building on these existing resources. This programme will address the needs of both new and experienced SNAs and cater for all schools' settings – primary, mainstream and special classes, post-primary, mainstream and special classes and special schools. This will ensure SNA competence and confidence is supported, as a key facilitator of an inclusive educational experience for students.

The programme will be delivered in two phases. In the first phase which commences on publication of the Plan the department will work to develop a structured approach to delivery of relevant and legitimate training opportunities for SNAs through existing organisations and agencies supporting the school sector. The department will work with the education support centres, Middletown Centre for Autism and the ETBs to provide bespoke training opportunities for SNAs and to facilitate communities of practice.

The department will work with the NCSE and the relevant agencies and organisations to support schools in accessing and availing of targeted training resources for SNAs. This will facilitate upskilling on care provision in areas such as diabetes, catheterisation and other significant medical care areas. There will be opportunities for schools to align training opportunities for SNAs with other school staff, where appropriate, and with SNAs in other schools in the locality, where feasible.

The department will also provide guidance for schools and boards by signposting relevant training opportunities on the SNA Information Hub on. www.gov.ie.

Other areas identified as identified as requiring support through appropriate training include communications with parents, supporting children with complex trauma and building proficiency in the Irish language. However, work under this pillar of the Plan will include mapping training needs with a view to supporting SNAs to understand best practice and department policy.

The second phase of the learning and development programme will commence from September 2027 when the NCSE will assume core responsibility for co-ordinating training for SNAs. The NCSE's role in this context will include working with the department and stakeholders to further develop appropriate training opportunities for SNAs. They will build on the existing resources and provide training and resources to support SNAs in developing their skills and knowledge in relation to special education and inclusive practices.

This will include a range of learning experiences for SNAs which may include seminars, webinars, professional learning communities, and associated resources.

The NCSE will also provide school-based supports and training to help schools address specific training needs and to increase awareness on special educational needs and inclusion in school communities. It is also intended that the department will establish a SNA learning and development review group to identify, review and validate training courses and upskilling opportunities for SNAs. This group comprising relevant stakeholders will be responsible for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of training programmes to support the SNA role. This includes ensuring training opportunities are of a high standard, have defined learning outcomes and are focused on delivering maximum benefit to students with special educational needs.

This programme will provide consistency in learning standards, adapt to the evolving needs of students and improve SNA's sense of belonging and engagement in the whole school community. Support and guidance will be made available to assist schools in accessing and providing quality training and achieving a standardised approach which supports an agile and responsive SNA workforce. The objective of this strategy is to ensure an effective service to students from the SNA workforce to enhance their school journey and support them to reach their full potential in school.

Collaboration between the schools, colleges, private providers, the department and its agencies and partners is required to meet the targets set out in this programme.

Building the SNA workforce capabilities will involve upskilling, coaching, and increased flexibility which will be supported by the programme. This will result in more capable, confident, and engaged SNAs who will feel more supported and valued.

6.8 Building Knowledge And Capability In The Irish Language

The SNA National Survey indicated that the majority of SNAs participants had limited proficiency in the Irish language. The SNA Workforce Development Plan sets out a proposal for the department to collaborate with relevant stakeholders to develop Irish language training for SNAs. This will provide opportunities for SNAs to train and upskill in the use of the Irish language in school.

the Plan provides that, within the context of their non-teaching care and support role, SNAs can support the use of the Irish language by students with special educational needs. This will be achieved by:

- Providing supports to SNAs to develop their proficiency in Irish.
- Providing guidance to SNAs on their role in a whole-school approach to supporting the use of Irish by pupils/students with special educational needs.

Implementation of this action will involve collaboration between key stakeholders including the department, the NCSE, the network of Education Support Centres and agencies such as An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)[45], working together to provide opportunities for SNAs to learn Irish.

The aim is to provide accessible training opportunities for SNAs to develop an appropriate level of proficiency in the Irish language. This will support SNAs in Irish and English medium schools to gain confidence in their understanding and use of the language on a daily basis in school.

45 An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta was established under the provisions of Section 31 of the Education Act 1998 to establish a structure to meet the educational needs of Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools.

Chapter 7

Pillar 4 Supporting SNA, Retention and Diversity

Pillar 4 sets out the department's strategic approach to recruitment, retention, and diversity within the SNA workforce, providing a coherent framework to ensure that schools can attract, develop, and retain committed and capable SNAs who reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

The objective of this pillar is to strengthen the systems that surround the SNA role; to ensure fairness, clarity, and equity; to support school communities and to build a dynamic SNA workforce that reflects the diversity, capability, and professionalism required to support an inclusive education system.

This pillar outlines a set of considered actions to enhance recruitment and retention in the SNA workforce while also promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. These actions form part of a framework of supports to provide positive educational experience and outcomes for students.

While up to now, the SNA system has grown organically in response to demand rather than through strategic workforce planning this SNA Workforce Development Plan sets out to build a coherent, sustainable, and future-oriented SNA workforce.

Between the publication of the 2014 circular and at the time of publication of this SNA Workforce Development Plan the SNA workforce will have more than doubled to approximately 25,000 by the end of 2026.

Societal changes have imposed additional complexity on Ireland's education system. Care needs among learners have intensified, with increased identification of complex medical, behavioural, and communication needs. Schools rely more than ever on SNAs as part of a whole school approach to providing targeted, responsive care and support.

Demographic shifts have also impacted with Census 2022 showing that Ireland is now home to over 631,000 non-Irish citizens, representing 12% of the population.[46] More than 18,000 Ukrainian pupils have enrolled in Irish schools,[48] alongside growing Traveller, Roma, and migrant communities.[47]

SNAs have demonstrated consistently high levels of commitment to meeting these needs. Stakeholder engagement, including focus groups with school leaders, SNAs, teachers, children and young people, highlight the professionalism and dedication that characterise the workforce. Staff retention rates in the workforce are strong. However, they also spotlight areas where consistency and clarity of approach can be enhanced to support SNAs and school communities.

Emerging opportunities include strengthening consistency in entry-level SNA course standards, enhancing recruitment practices and continuing to build greater diversity across the workforce. Support for probation management and a more streamlined garda vetting process are also among the needs which been identified. These along with the commitment in the public service pay agreement to review the SNA employment contract provide an impetus for significant policy developments under Pillar 4 Support SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.

46 https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/migrationanddiversity

47 https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/press-releases/department-of-education-confirms-over-18000-ukrainian-pupils-currently-enrolled-in-irish-schools/

48 *Supra* note 1.

A key step in workforce planning is the gathering of data and information to provide a strategic basis for decision making. Qualitative and quantitative research in preparation for the SNA Workforce Development Plan provides a significant repository of information and insight to support actions to address present and anticipated workforce challenges.

7.1 Recruitment

The recruitment process is a foundational component of workforce planning impacting directly on quality, consistency, and fairness. It includes every stage of hiring new SNAs; from the NCSE allocation of a post up to and including the induction and probation processes.

The criteria for recruitment and appointment of SNAs to schools is currently set out in Circular 0051/2019 – Recruitment and Appointment Procedures for Special Needs Assistants

Each year, schools are advised by the NCSE of arrangements for the allocation of SNA support to primary and post primary schools to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support as set out in SNA Allocation 2025/26 (Circular 32/2025)

Where an SNA post is deemed to be in excess of the allocation required to meet the needs of the school, schools are required to implement the supplementary assignment arrangements set out in Circular 0044/2026 Recruitment of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) – Supplementary Assignment Arrangements.

Feedback from stakeholders, national research and internal analysis by the department identifies scope for a more coherent and standardised approach to recruitment. Support is required across three interconnected areas: entry pathways, recruitment processes and supports for schools and SNAs.

While an adequate supply of candidates for SNA posts is indicated there is a need to improve entry level SNA courses to ensure they conform with best practice and confer the practical skills and insight required of the SNA role.

Challenges around the SNA recruitment process include concerns about fairness and transparency and the administrative burden imposed on school leaders. Stakeholders support the establishment of a clear, structured career pathway pitched at an appropriate level on QQI's National Framework of Qualifications providing clarity on to the value of courses. Standardised recruitment documentation and support to achieve best practice will reduce the administrative burden.

There is an opportunity to enhance the recruitment process through interview boards reflecting a wider range of experience, better gender balance and increased diversity, and a focus on expertise related to supporting special educational needs.

7.2 Staff Retention: Steady Growth and Low Churn

Numbers in the SNA workforce have continued to rise steadily in response to increasing demand for support. Payroll data shows only one change in this trend between 2008 and 2009 during the post-Celtic Tiger era.

The level of staff retention within the SNA workforce is one of the strongest features of the current system and represents a significant asset for the education sector. Analysis conducted by the department shows that churn rates remain consistently low, averaging 3.8% in primary schools and 5% in post-primary settings, with an overall churn rate of 4% across the workforce. These figures compare favourably with national benchmarks and are significantly lower than churn levels recorded in other sectors of the labour market, including the broader education sector which experiences 16% annual churn, and sectors such as administrative support or accommodation and food services where turnover rates exceed 20–25%.

This stability reflects the strong vocational commitment observed among SNAs, many of whom cite the meaningful nature of the work, strong relationships with students, and the sense of belonging within school communities as core motivations to remain in the role.

Public service status significantly enhances the attractiveness of the role. Well established public service terms and conditions provide access to incremental salary scales, ensuring transparent and predictable pay progression over time. Pensionable service further strengthens the overall employment package, contributing to long-term financial security. The role also benefits from a strong emphasis on family-friendly working arrangements, including flexible working options, generous leave provisions, and alignment with the school year. These features support a healthy work/life balance and make the position particularly appealing to candidates seeking flexibility and a rewarding public service career.

However, the enduring strength of retention masks a structural vulnerability: the age profile of the workforce. The most recent department data clearly shows a concentration of SNAs in the older age brackets, indicating a significant number of retirements within the next decade. Without action, this retirement cliff poses a risk to workforce supply, continuity of care, school operations, and national service planning.

7.3 Recruitment Process

Concerns expressed about the level of transparency and consistency in the recruitment process prompt consideration on how to provide assurance that the most suitable candidate will be selected.

One option considered is a centralised approach to SNA recruitment generating a panel of eligible SNAs for deployment in schools. While there was some support for a centralised approach which would also reduce the administrative burden on school leaders there was concern expressed about the impact on school autonomy.

Given the divergence in views the approach in this Plan is to improve consistency within the existing decentralised model rather than moving to a centralised approach at present. While acknowledging that schools value their autonomy in the recruitment process and centralised recruitment for SNAs is not achievable currently, the need for probity, transparency, consistency and fairness throughout the recruitment process remains. Indeed, an effective recruitment process is of utmost importance to the effective implementation of various actions, and delivery of the vision of, the SNA Workforce Plan. Therefore, other measures to address concerns are merited.

7.4 Enhancing the Recruitment Process

7.4.1 Clear and Consistent Entry Pathways

The need for greater consistency in entry level SNA courses is clearly indicated with stakeholders agreed that increased standardisation of course content will equip new SNAs to understand the responsibilities of this frontline role. The expertise of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (qqi.ie) and relevant stakeholders will support measures to improve consistency of learning outcomes. Emphasis on building practical skills and work experience to prepare students for the SNA role will support this objective. Standardised qualifications will help ensure that all candidates possess a foundational understanding of child development, care needs, safeguarding and role awareness.

Clear career pathways must be communicated to prospective SNAs, particularly school leavers and minority groups who may be unaware of the role or unsure of how to access training. Targeted progression, career guidance materials and collaboration with community organisations are required to broaden awareness and participation, and to support workforce diversity.

7.4.2 Standardised Processes Across Schools

A modern and equitable recruitment system requires consistent procedures at every stage, from advertising to shortlisting to interview. Templates for job advertisements will ensure that essential information; core duties, required skillsets, contract type and hours is communicated consistently across schools. A standardised application form will enhance comparability between candidates and reduce administrative duplication.

Schools will require clear guidance on board composition, ensuring panels include appropriate special educational needs expertise, gender balance, and as far as possible, diversity of background and perspective. This will support robust decision-making and increase confidence in the process among applicants. Together, these standardised processes will enhance consistency, fairness and compliance while reducing the administrative workload on schools.

7.4.3 Better Supports for SNAs and Schools

Recruitment reforms must be accompanied by supports that respond to identified capacity challenges at school level. A national recruitment guidance booklet will support boards of management and principals, covering advertising, shortlisting, interview protocols, scoring systems, record-keeping and post-interview communication. This guidance will also highlight legal obligations and explain best practice in avoiding conflicts of interest and ensuring procedural fairness.

Additional resources will be made available through the SNA Information Hub (the Hub), providing easily accessible, up-to-date, and practical online guidance for both schools and prospective SNAs. This will ensure that information about the role, the application process, required qualifications and interview preparation is clear and consistent.

To promote inclusion and reach diverse communities, multilingual recruitment resources will be developed to support jobseekers and enhance workforce diversity. This includes translated advertisements, explanatory materials and culturally accessible communications.

Finally, targeted diversity-focused recruitment campaigns will showcase the SNA role, promote its career value, and encourage participation from underrepresented groups. Such campaigns are aligned with broader government commitments to equity, inclusion and workforce diversity, and respond directly to findings from stakeholder engagement.

Recruitment reform is essential to improving fairness, transparency, and workforce capability. A more accessible, standardised process supported by clearer qualification pathways will improve system equity and ensure that schools can attract the most suitable candidates.

While acknowledging that schools value their autonomy in the recruitment process and centralised recruitment for SNAs is not achievable at this time, the need for probity, transparency, consistency and fairness throughout the recruitment process remains. Indeed, it is of utmost importance to the effective implementation of various actions, and delivery of the vision of, the SNA Workforce Plan. Therefore, other measures to address concerns are merited.

A review of *Circular 0051/2019 – Recruitment and Appointment Procedures for Special Needs Assistants* is required to ensure that procedures align with the SNA Workforce Development Plan and best practice. Input from *Working Group 4 Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity* will inform this review. This review is to address all aspects of the recruitment process including shortlisting processes, approach to convening interview boards, scoring mechanisms and managing conflicts of interest.

A standardised application form reflecting the indicators of effective practices earmarked for development *under Pillar 2 Establish a SNA Quality Framework* accompanied by appropriate guidance and templates will support consistency of approach.

Measures undertaken under *Pillar 3 Learning and Development* to standardise entry level SNA courses and to raise the minimum educational requirement will contribute to greater preparedness for the role as will induction training and effective probation management. The SNA Redeployment Scheme will provide increased job security for SNAs thereby making the role more attractive.

Support for SNAs to build their understanding of the recruitment process can also contribute to effective recruitment. This will be delivered through online resources on the SNA information hub and may take the form of an information booklet or online resources providing information and guidance offering essential details about the application process, salary scale, role requirements, interview preparation and all other relevant information. This will be accessible on the SNA information hub and other options to disseminate this information will be explored.

Lack of diversity, gender imbalance and an older age profile are challenges in the SNA workforce. The recruitment process offers the potential to address these challenges through advertisements for SNA posts in multiple languages and promoting the SNA role with school leavers and others such as those in careers which retire early.

7.4.4 Cross Cutting Actions

An effective recruitment strategy will be supported by actions on probation management and mentoring under *Pillar 3 Establishment of a SNA Learning and Development Programme*. Actions to support minority groups in *Pillar 5 Devise a Communication Strategy* will also contribute to this objective.

7.5 Minimum Educational Requirement

The minimum educational requirement for appointment to the post of SNA is currently set out in *Circular 0051/2019 'Recruitment and Appointment Procedures for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)*. The current requirement for eligibility for appointment as an SNA in a recognised school is:

- A level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications; or
- A minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate; or
- Equivalent.

It was highlighted during research for the Plan that the current requirement no longer reflects the reality of a well-educated workforce and the demands of the role. The first national survey of SNAs conducted in 2024 indicated that 70% of the responding SNAs had obtained a qualification at National Framework of Qualifications NFQ level 6 or above with an additional 22% holding a minimum of NFQ level 5. 80% of respondents indicated they agreed that the minimum educational requirement should be raised.

There has broadly been an increase in the educational attainment of SNAs reflecting their strong commitment to their role and to providing high quality support to children. The National Training Programme for SNAs currently delivered by Atlantic Technological University has contributed to this increase through the 3,774 SNAs who have completed the course to date. Fully funded by the department through the NCSE this course is delivered free of charge to existing SNAs employed in the sector.

The high level of educational attainment which has been achieved organically prompts consideration as to whether it is necessary to increase the minimum educational requirements.

In addition, feedback from the focus groups with SNAs, school leaders and teachers suggest that, where a recruited SNA meets the current minimum requirement only, challenges may arise. Examples shared with department relate to the complexity of the curriculum at post-primary level which can be problematic, for example where the SNA is supporting a student with hearing or vision impairment who is accessing a number of higher-level subjects.

Through the Working Groups for the Plan stakeholders considered feedback from the focus groups and the SNA survey as well as drawing on their own experience and expertise. These groups also considered:

- Minimum educational requirements for similar roles within Ireland and Europe.
- Research conducted by Fórsa trade union in 2017, where the majority of SNAs surveyed held a FETAC level 5 (30%) or a FETAC level 6 (27%) qualification. Only 3% of respondents indicated they have the minimum qualification of a Junior Certificate.
- The 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2016) Report on the Role of the SNA' which noted that, whilst the training and level of qualifications held by SNAs vary, a strong majority of survey respondents possessed qualifications well beyond the minimum entry criteria (level 3 NFQ).
- The economic context in which the SNA workforce operates where there is effectively full employment (4.9% unemployment)[49] and a competitive jobs market has the potential to impede supply of SNA candidates if not managed correctly.

Given the feedback during the research phase along with the collaboration with stakeholders on the Plan and taking into account the passage of time since the current educational requirements were set and the evolution of the role and duties, it was deemed appropriate that the minimum educational requirement is increased.

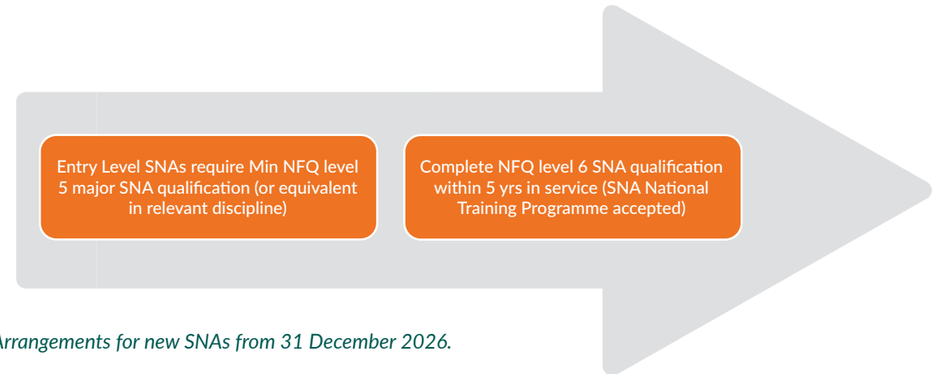
The goal of the review was to ensure the minimum educational requirements for the SNA role is appropriate to the current SNA role and duties and provides a basis for a competent, skilled SNA workforce. A key priority of the review was to ensure that any proposals in this area would be transparent, fair and reasonable. A proportionality assessment, in line with the European Union (Regulated Professions Proportionality Assessment) Regulations 2022, was carried out and passed by the DFHERIS.

of the foregoing, a proposal is included in the plan to work towards a minimum educational requirement of NFQ Level 6 in SNA training or a relevant discipline for the SNA workforce. This will be achieved through a phased approach which will provide an appropriate lead in time for existing SNAs to meet these requirements and will be accompanied by appropriate exemptions. New SNAs will initially be required to have a minimum educational qualification of NFQ Level 5 or equivalent in a relevant discipline. After a period of 5 years the minimum requirement for recruitment to the role will the raised to a level 6 NFQ major award in SNA training or equivalent.

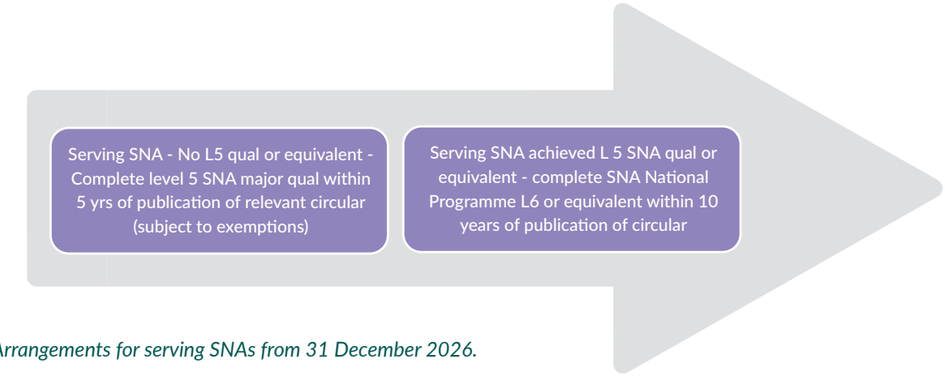
49 Key Findings Labour Force Survey Quarter 1 2026 – Central Statistics Office.

The following to be achieved over the next ten years:

- A minimum Level 5 NFQ major award in SNA training or equivalent to be achieved by 50% of serving SNAs by 2028 and 80% within 5 years of publication of the Plan.
- A minimum Level 6 major award to be achieved by 90% of all serving SNAs within 10 years of publication of the Plan.



Arrangements for new SNAs from 31 December 2026.



Arrangements for serving SNAs from 31 December 2026.

4. To ensure the effectiveness of the twin track approach the department will work with QQI and other relevant stakeholders to consider the existing SNA Level 5 further education and training opportunities and ensure that the award standards are reviewed to ensure consistency and continuity.
5. The department will work with ATU, QQI and other relevant stakeholders to explore whether stand-alone modules might be developed to maximise accessibility and a value for money approach and ensure that targeted training can be accessed where appropriate to meet specific learning and development gaps. This would ensure that those SNAs who have completed one or other of these levels in a relevant discipline or have completed targeted training in some of the relevant areas, will be able to access the additional necessary training modules that they have not completed. This may include practical training, where appropriate.
6. For some SNAs who have significant on-the-job experience there may be an exemption recognising this. This will be subject to a minimum period to be determined.
7. The department will collaborate with third level providers and other relevant experts in quality accreditation to ensure a streamlined process is designed to facilitate this twin-track approach. This will include working with QQI and other relevant stakeholders and experts in the field to develop and maintain quality standards in the NFQ Level 5 and level 6 awards in Special Needs Assistance.
8. Develop a mechanism to assess prior qualifications, learning and experience including in relation to the equivalence of qualifications including those attained outside of Ireland.
9. Case studies will be developed to capture how these changes will look in the case of a prospective SNA, a newly recruited SNA and an experienced or more senior SNA reflecting a relevant and effective response to their training needs.
10. Reasonable exceptions will include those with an equivalent qualification, subject to evaluation.
11. A 'grandfather clause' will be considered, to exempt those who are within five years of retirement on the day that the new rules take effect. However, as the new rules propose to allow at least five years to achieve targets the need for this may not arise.

7.6 Review of SNA Contract

7.6.1 Rationale for Contract Reform

Up to now, terms around the contract of employment for special needs assistants employed in primary and second level schools have been set out in Circular 15/2005 and Circular 12/2005 respectively. These contracts were developed more than two decades ago need to reflect recent employment legislation, policy developments and the evolved nature of the SNA role.

The review of the SNA employment contract is a commitment set out in the (previous) public service pay agreement Building Momentum 1 and Building Momentum 2 Clause 1.5.3 (2).[50] This commitment was deferred to align with work on the SNA Workforce Development Plan.

The most recent **Public Service Agreement 2024 to 2026**, outlines that the SNA contract review is one of key elements of the Government's Reform Agenda.[51]

The SNAWDU advanced the review of the SNA contract as part of its broader remit to align contractual arrangements with current departmental policy and current employment legislation culminating in the preparation of revised contracts.

7.6.2 Issues Identified in Stakeholder Consultations

As part of the stakeholder engagement process, the department met with school management bodies to gather their views on the draft contract and ensure that the practical realities of school operations are reflected. During this engagement, school management and trade union representatives both emphasised the need for greater clarity in the terminology and language used, with a view to supporting consistent interpretation and implementation across schools.

Stakeholders emphasised the need to maintain appropriate flexibility within the contract so that schools can respond to the needs of students and the school community. Both management bodies and trade unions requested consideration of the treatment of reception and dispersal time within the working week.

Specific concerns were raised regarding the post-primary school year and hours of work during the month of June in post-primary settings, noting that these arrangements can be complex and often require a holistic, context-sensitive approach. The union underlined the necessity of clear communication between schools and SNAs in advance of June activities, as well as mutual flexibility to ensure that arrangements operate smoothly for all parties.

Collectively, the contributions of all the stakeholders reflect a shared commitment to ensuring that the SNA contract supports clarity, fairness, and operational practicality.

50 "The Department of Education, in consultation with Fórsa, will review whether the existing SNA contract, including the appropriate use of the contracted 72 hours, requires updating in the context of ongoing reform in the area of special education in the sector and changes in employment law."

51 Public Service Agreement 2024-2026, Key Elements of the Government's Reform Agenda: "Education Sector – Engagement on the outcome of the Policy Advice on Inclusive Education; engagement on the review of the EPSEN act and the SNA Workforce development plan including review of the SNA contract."

7.6.3 Reviewing the Contract

The modernisation of the SNA contract represents a pivotal reform within the Plan, ensuring that contractual arrangements are fit for purpose, aligned with current employment legislation, and reflective of the evolving role of SNAs in schools. The revised combined primary and post-primary SNA contract will replace the outdated framework derived from Circulars 12/2005 and 15/2005 and will create a coherent, modern, and legally robust basis for employment across all school settings. Separate templates will be published for the following employment arrangements:

1. Contract of employment for Special Needs Assistants in Standard Post.
2. Contract of employment for Special Needs Assistants in a Fixed Term Post.

The previous circulars, Circular 15/2005 and Circular 12/2005 will be replaced by Circular 0039/2026 Contract of employment for Special Needs Assistants in Standard Posts and Circular 0040/2026 Contract of Employment for Special Needs Assistants in Fixed-term Posts.

A unified contract will eliminate long-standing inconsistencies between sectors and ensure that all SNAs, regardless of setting, work to the same terms, definitions and expectations. However, it also allows appropriate flexibility to meet varying school hours. This is essential for workforce agility, the implementation of the SNA Redeployment Scheme, and the establishment of a more coherent national approach to workforce planning.

Central to the revised contract is a clearer articulation of the core duties and expectations of SNAs. This clarity responds directly to findings from school leaders and SNAs, who have consistently highlighted ambiguity around tasks, supervision arrangements, reception and dispersal responsibilities, break entitlements and communication protocols. By explicitly referencing and aligning with the updated role of SNA Circular 0032/2026, the contract will embed consistency in role interpretation and support schools in deploying SNAs appropriately.

The modernised contract also sets out strengthened and transparent working-time arrangements. This will include clarity on the working week, the organisation of the School Community Time hours, and how flexibility is to be applied in practice.

Given the sensitive nature of the work, the contract will incorporate strengthened confidentiality and GDPR clauses. These will reflect the legal obligations associated with accessing student information and participating in personal care tasks.

Albeit, while robust contractual arrangements are essential to ensure compliance with employment legislation and to safeguard both the employer and employee, they cannot fully capture the collaborative spirit required for effective school functioning. In practice, the success of care provision and inclusive education relies significantly on goodwill arrangements, where flexibility, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to student wellbeing guide day-to-day interactions. Such goodwill, underpinned by clear communication and inclusive leadership, enables SNAs, teachers, and school leaders to respond adaptively to students' needs and to support one another beyond the confines of formal role descriptions.

7.6.4 Supporting Schools to Implement the Contract

Successful implementation of the revised SNA contract requires a strong support framework for schools, recognising that boards of management and school leaders carry the charge of employer responsibilities. Consistent feedback from stakeholders emphasises that contract reforms, while necessary, must be matched with practical guidance, templates and accessible information to support day-to-day application.

Department guidance will therefore issue to assist boards of management and principals in understanding contractual obligations. This guidance will align with employment legislation, the updated role circular on the role of the SNA and relevant aspects of the Plan. It will also help ensure that practices are consistent across schools. By providing clarity on which contract type to be used schools will be supported in meeting their legal and administrative requirements. School boards of management and ETBs as the employer will then decide on a case-by-case basis which is relevant to the particular employment situation.

To support accessibility, all materials will be published on the SNA Information Hub, creating a single national point of reference for SNAs, principals and boards of management. The Hub will include guidance and relevant circulars. Over time it will be supplemented by additional supports under the Learning and Development Programme, including induction modules, probation-related training, and refresher resources.

Through these measures, schools will be better supported to implement the revised contract in a consistent, compliant and practical way. This will help ensure that contractual reforms achieve their intended impact on job clarity, professional practice and workforce sustainability.

A modernised and clearly articulated SNA contract is central to strengthening the SNA workforce and supporting the effective inclusion of children with additional care needs. By updating and unifying contractual provisions, the system moves decisively toward greater role clarity, enhanced professional standards, and improved operational consistency across schools.

The revised contract will improve job clarity for SNAs, address long-standing issues and reinforce fairness and transparency for both employers and employees. These improvements will, in turn, enhance the attractiveness of the role, support recruitment and retention, and provide the necessary foundation for implementing other key reforms such as the redeployment scheme, the quality framework and modernised training pathways.

With strong implementation supports, including national guidance, templates, induction resources and an accessible digital information hub, the education system will be equipped to embed a modern contract that is fit for purpose, compliant with legislation, and aligned with contemporary needs. Taken together, these reforms represent a significant step in professionalising the SNA role, supporting workforce sustainability, and ensuring that schools have the clarity and stability required to deliver high-quality support to students with special educational and care needs.

7.7 Managing SNA Probation

7.7.1 Overview

Probation is a foundational element of workforce quality, safeguarding standards of practice and ensuring that newly appointed SNAs are supported to perform effectively within the school environment. A well-structured probation system enables schools to assess an SNA's suitability for the role, identify strengths and developmental needs, and provide constructive guidance that supports professional growth. It also allows for early identification and management of performance issues, reducing the risk of challenges becoming entrenched and impacting the delivery of care to students.

However, despite its importance, evidence from schools, SNAs and stakeholder organisations indicates considerable inconsistency in how probation is managed. In some cases, new SNAs complete probation without any formal feedback or documented assessment, a significant risk to both workforce quality and fair employment practice.

7.7.2 Current Context

The introduction of the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Regulations (2022) brought greater clarity to the legal framework governing probation across all sectors, including education. Under these Regulations, probation:

- May be no longer than six months, except in exceptional circumstances where an extension is demonstrably in the employee's interest.
- Must be explicitly stated in the written contract of employment must allow for structured feedback and assessment.

7.7.3 Elements of an Effective Probation System

Stakeholder engagement consistently highlighted that an effective probation system for SNAs must be structured, transparent, and supportive, ensuring fairness for employees and confidence for employers. Such a system should not only identify concerns at an early stage, but also reinforce good practice, embed role clarity, and support the development of a skilled and confident workforce.

Clarity at the outset is essential. Newly appointed SNAs should receive comprehensive and accessible information that clearly outlines their responsibilities, the standards against which they will be assessed, and the expectations of the school. This includes a role description aligned with the relevant circular, clearly distinguishing duties within and outside the remit of the role. Responsibilities should reflect the needs of students and the school context while remaining within national guidance to avoid inappropriate task allocation. SNAs should also be provided with and directed to familiarise themselves with key school policies, including behaviour support, safeguarding, intimate care, health and safety, and data protection. SNAs should be supported to understand relevant material in student support plans, individual student needs, communication approaches, and agreed strategies. Clear communication protocols are also necessary to define engagement with teachers and school leadership as well as parents. Establishing this clarity early enables SNAs to perform effectively and ensures that assessment is grounded in transparent expectations.

A structured and predictable review process is equally important. Probation should include an initial induction preferably within the first two weeks, a mid-probation review, and a final review before the end of the probationary period. The induction provides an opportunity to clarify expectations and identify any early training needs. The mid-point review allows for constructive feedback, recognition of strengths, and mutual identification of areas requiring support, ensuring that issues can be addressed in a timely manner. The final review should formally determine the outcome of probation in a way that is evidence-based and not unexpected. This sequencing strengthens consistency, transparency, and fairness.

The long term benefits which accrue in terms of ensuring a new hire fully understands their roles and responsibilities are invaluable. It also provides an opportunity to assess the suitability of a new staff member before committing to employment. There are opportunities to support schools and build consistency through the use of standardised templates. These provide clear and practical tools for assessment, reduce variability in practice, and support objectivity in decision-making. They also establish a shared understanding of effective performance and reduce administrative burden by offering ready-to-use documentation.

Schools will also be supported through the provision of training, such as online modules, webinars, and exemplar materials.

Finally, the ability to address issues at an early stage is central to an effective probation process. Where concerns arise, they should be documented promptly, communicated clearly and respectfully, and addressed through appropriate supports such as coaching or mentoring. Expectations for improvement should be clearly outlined, with agreed timelines and follow-up reviews. Where improvement does not occur, concerns should be escalated appropriately. This approach ensures that outcomes are evidence-based and that SNAs are given a fair opportunity to succeed, while preventing issues from becoming embedded.

The evidence demonstrates a consistent and pressing need to improve and standardise probation management for SNAs across the system. Without a structured, transparent framework, valuable opportunities for early support are missed, SNAs may be left without meaningful feedback, and schools may face challenges managing performance once staff become established.

To address these risks and strengthen workforce quality, the SNA Workforce Development Plan will introduce:

- Probation guidance, detailing expectations, processes and best practice.
- Standardised templates and documentation tools, ensuring uniformity and reducing administrative burden.
- Targeted training for school leaders, building confidence and capability.
- A mechanism for recording and monitoring probation outcomes, supporting compliance and oversight.

Together, these measures will deliver a more consistent, equitable and effective system, enabling SNAs to develop competence and confidence from the outset and enhancing the overall quality of support provided to students with additional needs.

7.8 Centralised Garda Vetting

7.8.1 Overview

Garda vetting is a statutory safeguarding requirement for all individuals engaged in work involving access to, or contact with, children and vulnerable persons. Under the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012–2016, an individual may not commence relevant work until a valid vetting disclosure has been issued by the Garda National Vetting Bureau (GNVB).

Within the education system, teachers benefit from a single, portable vetting arrangement administered by the Teaching Council, enabling them to move between schools without repeating vetting. In contrast, SNAs are required to be vetted separately for each employer, including individual schools and Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This lack of portability presents an opportunity to generate greater efficiency within the system.

7.8.2 Generating efficiencies

The existing model creates a range of operational and administrative challenges. SNAs must submit multiple vetting applications for similar roles, sometimes within short timeframes, resulting in duplication and delays in clearance. For schools, this presents difficulties in filling substitute vacancies, as SNAs who are otherwise available cannot be deployed until vetting has been completed. This can disrupt provision and impact continuity of support for students. Currently the department provides funding to several school management bodies for the processing of applications for Garda Vetting for ancillary staff. These bodies seek funding in respect of both pay and non-pay costs incurred through this work.

The administrative burden is considerable. School management bodies process large volumes of applications, requiring staffing resources and ongoing engagement with the GNVB. At a system level, there it potential to reduce the volume of applications to the GNVB, while ensuring child protection remains the focus.

7.8.3 Interdepartmental Group Report

The issue of vetting portability has been recognised at national level. An Interdepartmental Group established in 2021 by the Department of Justice is examining operational and legislative aspects of the vetting system, including movement between similar roles. However, there is no certainty that this process will address the specific needs of the education sector or resolve the immediate challenges relating to SNAs.

7.8.4 Stakeholder Views

Engagement with stakeholders demonstrates strong and consistent support for reform. School management bodies, unions and other sectoral representatives are aligned in their views that current arrangements are inefficient. There is broad agreement on the need for a single, centralised vetting process and shared recognition that the NCSE is well positioned to undertake this role, given its statutory functions and operational interface with schools. School leaders emphasise that reform would assist recruitment, reduce administrative burden, and enhance access to substitute SNAs, particularly in high-demand or hard-to-fill settings.

7.8.5 Proposed NCSE-Led Model

A centralised, NCSE-led approach to Garda vetting is proposed. Under this model, the NCSE would act as a single “relevant organisation” under vetting legislation, authorised to seek, receive and securely store vetting disclosures. SNAs would undergo vetting once, with the resulting disclosure recognised across all schools and ETBs.

Schools would remain the legal employer and retain responsibility for recruitment decisions but would be able to rely on centrally held vetting information, accessed in a secure and controlled manner. This approach would streamline processes, remove duplication, and reduce administrative burden across the system. It would also ease demand on the GNVB and enable SNAs, particularly substitutes, to be deployed more quickly and flexibly in response to school needs.

7.8.6 Legislative Considerations

The department will work with stakeholders to deliver a centralised approach to garda vetting for SNAs Implementing a centralised vetting model will likely require legislative change to ensure NCSE has the authority to act as a relevant organisation.

Centralised Garda vetting represents a significant and necessary modernisation of current arrangements. Introducing a single, portable vetting pathway for SNAs will address long-standing inefficiencies, strengthen safeguarding, and support more responsive workforce deployment.

7.9 The SNA Redeployment Scheme

7.9.1 Overview

To support the objective of a dynamic workforce of SNAs, which delivers the best outcome for children with significant care needs in our schools it is necessary to have a mechanism to facilitate the redeployment of eligible SNAs from schools with staffing above the approved allocation. As a needs-based service the SNA workforce must be responsive to changes such as demographic shifts and falling enrolments.

The establishment of an SNA Redeployment scheme represents one of the most transformative reforms within the Plan. For the first time, the education system will have a structured, transparent mechanism to redeploy SNAs whose posts are deemed to be in excess of the allocation required to meet the needs of the school, due to demographic change, revised allocations to meet the need of all schools across the system, or school-level restructuring. This mechanism is essential for maintaining a stable, experienced SNA workforce, ensuring continuity of support to students with significant care needs, and modernising workforce planning across primary, post-primary and special school settings.

Overall, the SNA Redeployment scheme will confer benefits on school communities through effective and responsive service delivery by a SNA workforce which is well placed to respond to emerging needs.

7.9.2 Current Arrangements

To date, arrangements aimed at supporting greater employment stability for SNAs have been provided for through the Supplementary Assignment Arrangements (SAA). The circular provides that where an employer receives an application for a vacancy from one or more SNAs who are due to be made redundant, and where the applicant furnishes a certified copy of the relevant confirmation form, the employer is obliged to offer the vacancy to one of those SNAs. The SAA represent an important mechanism for supporting continuity of employment and retaining experienced SNAs within the school system. Insights from this model have informed the development of an SNA Redeployment Scheme by demonstrating how resource flexibility can be used to address staffing imbalances and help ensure a steady supply of qualified SNAs to schools, while also supporting greater employment stability and continuity of experience for students and school communities.

7.9.3 Stakeholder Engagement

The consultation process underpinning the Plan, spanning working group 4, the dedicated sub-group on redeployment, management bodies, ETBI, NCSE, unions, school leaders, teachers and SNAs, identified a clear and shared ambition for a redeployment system that is robust, equitable and operationally seamless. Stakeholders emphasised that redeployment is not simply an administrative process but a critical component of workforce stability and student support.

A central priority identified was the need for simplicity, transparency, and operational clarity. Stakeholders highlighted that the success of the scheme will depend on clearly defined eligibility criteria, consistent national application, and well-communicated timelines aligned with allocation processes. Schools and SNAs alike require certainty in order to plan effectively, and a streamlined approach will build confidence and compliance.

The need for clear roles and responsibilities were also emphasised. Given the number of actors involved, including schools, Boards of Management, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), and unions, it is essential that each stage of the process is clearly defined and communicated. Without this clarity, there is a risk of inconsistency and administrative burden at school level.

Another key theme emerging from consultation was the importance of supporting SNAs through the transition process. Redeployment may involve movement between different school types or settings and variation in the type of needs to be supported. Each school is a separate workplace where working environments may vary. Stakeholders stressed that redeployment should not simply involve the movement of SNAs but should be accompanied by appropriate training to ensure that SNAs are supported in their new roles. This aligns closely with broader workforce development objectives and highlights the potential for redeployment to act as a catalyst for professional growth.

Support for schools and employers was also identified as critical. Boards of Management and Education and Training Boards, as employers, will play a central role in implementing the scheme. Stakeholders highlighted the need for clear guidance, standardised templates, and accessible supports to manage processes such as redundancy, redeployment, and integration of staff. Ensuring that the scheme is proportionate and minimising the associated administrative burden will be essential to its success.

Across all stakeholder groups, there was a shared view that the scheme must be fair to SNAs, centred on the needs of students, and practical for schools to implement. While widely regarded as necessary and overdue, its success will depend on careful sequencing, clear communication, and sustained support during implementation.

7.9.4 Benefits of the Redeployment Scheme

When fully operational, the SNA Redeployment Scheme is expected to deliver significant, system-wide benefits for SNAs, schools, pupils, and the wider education system.

For SNAs, the scheme improves employment stability providing an opportunity to be redeployed to a school which has a vacant post. This represents a substantial improvement in job security and addresses long-standing concerns about annual allocations and employment continuity. By retaining experienced SNAs within the system, the scheme also supports professional stability and reinforces the role as a viable long-term career.

For schools, the scheme offers more timely access to experienced and vetted SNAs, reducing reliance on external recruitment processes. This is expected to improve continuity of support for students, particularly those with complex needs, and to reduce the administrative burden associated with recruitment and selection.

At system level, the scheme supports a more strategic and efficient approach to workforce planning. By enabling the redistribution of staff in response to changing needs, it reduces inefficiencies associated with redundancies and repeated recruitment. It also promotes greater consistency of approach to the SNA role across different sectors through the sharing of previous experience.

Most importantly, the scheme enhances the system's capacity to deliver consistent, high-quality support to students with additional care needs. By ensuring that experienced SNAs are retained and effectively deployed, it contributes directly to improved educational and care outcomes

The establishment of a national SNA Redeployment Scheme represents a major step forward in the evolution of the education workforce. It shifts to a more coherent, strategic model of workforce management.

By introducing clear rules, transparent processes, and a strong emphasis on support and training, the scheme will retain valuable expertise, provide greater security for SNAs, and enable schools to meet student needs more effectively. It also supports broader reforms aimed at professionalising the SNA role and strengthening workforce planning.

Successful implementation will require sustained collaboration across all stakeholders, supported by clear communication and strong operational leadership. With these elements in place, the redeployment scheme has the potential to deliver lasting benefits for SNAs, schools, and, most importantly, the children who rely on their support.

7.10 Staff Retention in the SNA Workforce, Addressing a Retirement Cliff and Promoting the SNA Role as a Career Choice

7.10.1 Overview

High levels of staff retention within the SNA workforce remains one of the strongest features of the current system and represents a significant asset for the education sector. Analysis conducted by the department's Statistics Section reflects consistently low churn rates, averaging 1.5% in primary schools and 2% in post-primary settings, with an overall churn rate of 2% across the workforce. This stability reflects the strong vocational commitment of SNAs, supported by positive working relationships and a sense of purpose. Pension arrangements and the broader benefits of public service employment impact positively on retention levels and are expected to underpin the attractiveness of the role over the long term.

	Churn Rate
Primary	1.5%
Special	4.2%
Post-Primary	2.0%
Total	2.0%

Churn Rates at Primary and Post-Primary Level in November 2025.

However, this stability masks a structural vulnerability. The age profile of the workforce indicates that a substantial proportion of SNAs will reach retirement age within the next decade. Without a strategic response, this "retirement cliff" poses risks to workforce supply, continuity of support for students, and system-level planning.

7.10.2 Stakeholder Engagement

The SNA Survey findings show high levels of job satisfaction, with most SNAs reporting that they value their work and feel part of their school communities. At the same time, challenges are evident.

Many SNAs experience work-related stress linked to the complexity of student needs. Many newly recruited SNAs report challenges in securing mortgages due to contract uncertainty, and school leaders acknowledge that the current system introduces avoidable instability. These findings align with focus-group feedback which emphasised the need for clearer contract arrangements and transparent policies around increases or reductions in allocations.

The forthcoming SNA Redeployment Scheme is expected to play a transformative role in addressing job-security concerns. This reform is expected to strengthen workforce stability by ensuring that experienced, skilled SNAs are as far as possible retained within the system.

School leaders continue to view the SNA workforce as stable and committed but highlight structural challenges that may affect future retention. Chief among these is the absence of a defined career pathway. The role remains largely static, with limited opportunities for progression, specialisation, or recognition of additional skills.

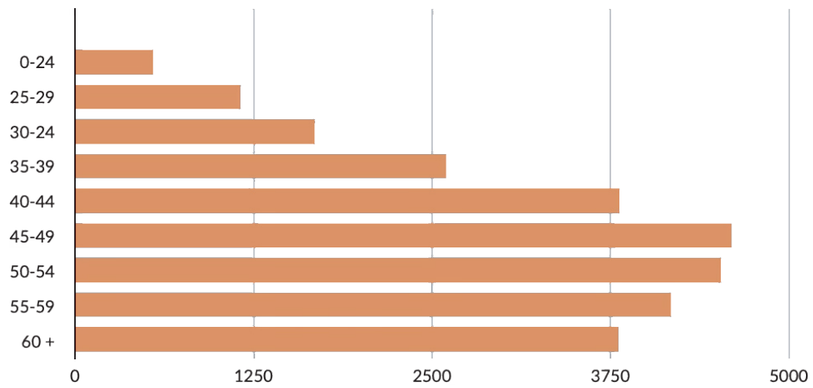
Leaders also report that inconsistent access to specialised training contributes to frustration among SNAs. Many experienced SNAs wish to deepen their expertise in areas such as autism support, positive behaviour strategies, or supporting complex medical needs. Access to training, however, varies significantly by school type, geography, and resources.

School communities also report increasing complexity within classrooms. A growing number of students present with multiple or overlapping additional needs, which increases pressure on SNAs. School leaders indicate that some SNAs express hesitation about moving into special classes or special schools, frequently because they feel underprepared to meet the needs in those settings.

7.10.3 The Retirement Cliff

The most significant long-term challenge to retention and workforce stability is the age profile of SNAs. Workforce data from June 2023 to March 2025 shows that the workforce is steadily ageing, with a particularly large concentration in the 50–54, 55–59, and 60–64 age bands. The 50–54 age band has been the largest cohort for several reporting periods, and more than half of all SNAs are now aged 50 or above.

A substantial proportion of SNAs will reach retirement age within the next decade. This will result in a loss of experience and institutional knowledge, increased recruitment pressures, and greater demand for training and induction of new staff. This is not solely a workforce issue but a service-delivery challenge, which requires an appropriate response to ensure continuity and quality of support provided to students with additional needs.



Age profile of SNAs November 2025.

7.10.4 Retention Requires a Career Vision

One of the clearest messages across stakeholder engagement is the desire for the SNA role to be recognised as a career, not a temporary or transitional occupation. The absence of a structured career framework undermines long-term planning and makes the role less attractive for school leavers and younger adults.

Sustaining retention over the longer term will require a stronger focus on career development and role sustainability. The department takes a positive and strategic view of the development of career pathways within the SNA workforce, recognising that the role must be positioned as a viable long-term career rather than a static support function.

This includes consideration of structured career development opportunities, enhanced access to a learning and development programme, and the potential for progression through the introduction of posts of responsibility within the SNA grade. Such measures would support recognition of experience and specialist skills, while also strengthening the attractiveness of the role for new entrants.

As part of the next phase of workforce development, there will be a need to further examine the issues raised through stakeholder engagement, including the potential scope for posts of responsibility and other career progression mechanisms within the SNA role. While outside the scope of work on the SNA Workforce Development Plan this will form an important element of maintaining motivation and ensuring the ongoing sustainability and professionalisation of the workforce.

The SNA workforce enjoys strong retention levels, driven by a deep commitment to students and strong connections with school communities. However, the structural risks, particularly the approaching retirement cliff and the absence of a clear career framework, require strategic and coordinated action. the Plan provides a comprehensive response: strengthening job security through redeployment; building a national learning and development programme; improving the probation process; and establishing clearer, more transparent pathways into and through the profession. Collectively, these measures will support the long-term stability, quality, and resilience of the SNA workforce, ensuring that students with additional care needs continue to receive the support they require in the years ahead.

7.11 Promoting Diversity in the SNA Workforce

7.11.1 Overview

Ireland's demographic landscape has transformed significantly in recent decades, and today's schools reflect an unprecedented level of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. Classrooms include students from migrant families, multilingual households, Traveller and Roma communities, and children who have arrived through humanitarian programmes. Yet despite this rich diversity among students, the profile of the SNA workforce has not evolved at the same pace.

Workforce data indicates that the SNA profession remains approximately 92% female and 98% white, with very low participation from Traveller, Roma, migrant, and minority ethnic communities. Male representation is also limited. This imbalance is not simply demographic; it affects the system's capacity to respond effectively to diverse needs. A more representative workforce strengthens communication with families, supports culturally informed practice, and fosters a stronger sense of belonging among students. For many children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, seeing themselves reflected in school staff is a key element of inclusion.

Improving diversity within the SNA workforce is therefore central to both educational equity and service quality. It requires coordinated action across recruitment, training, workplace culture, and system-level monitoring.

7.11.2 Barriers Faced by Minority Communities

Engagement with Traveller and Roma organisations and community leaders demonstrates that barriers to entering the SNA workforce are multifaceted and deeply rooted in structural and cultural realities.

For many Traveller and Roma community members, negative past experiences of the education system continue to cast a long shadow. These communities have frequently encountered stigma, exclusion, and low expectations within schooling environments. As a result, the prospect of returning to schools in a staff capacity can be emotionally challenging. Trust must first be rebuilt before participation can be broadened.

A further barrier emerges in the training environment. Community representatives described mainstream training programmes as insufficiently culturally safe, with limited awareness of Traveller, Roma, or minority cultural contexts. Some participants reported feeling judged, misunderstood, or unwelcome, which reduces participation and progression. For individuals seeking to re-enter education after long absences, culturally safe and community-informed training settings are vital.

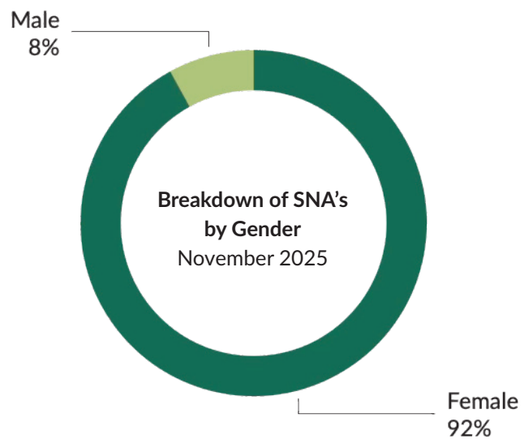
Another consistent theme is a widespread lack of awareness of the SNA role, particularly within minority and migrant communities. Job advertisements are rarely provided in multiple languages, and information about the role seldom reaches smaller or marginalised communities. As a result, many individuals who might excel in the SNA profession simply do not encounter accessible information.

7.11.3 The Need for Cultural Competence in Schools

Increasing diversity in the workforce must be accompanied by a deliberate strengthening of cultural competence within schools. Stakeholders emphasised that recruitment efforts alone will not succeed if school environments are not equipped to support staff from a wider range of backgrounds.

To attract and retain a diverse SNA workforce, schools must be places where individuals from minority groups feel safe, respected, and confident in bringing their full identity to work. Cultural competence training, embedded across the system rather than delivered as a one-off intervention is essential.

7.11.4 Gender Diversity and the Importance of Male Role Models



Breakdown of SNA's by Gender November 2025

The gender imbalance within the SNA workforce is pronounced and requires targeted action. With women accounting for the overwhelming majority of SNAs, students infrequently encounter male role models in care-focused roles within schools.

Increasing male participation is important for workforce diversity and for the school environment more broadly. The presence of male SNAs can provide additional relational and behavioural supports for some students and contributes to a more balanced representation of adult roles within schools. However, the objective is not simply to recruit more men, but to reposition the SNA role as a skilled, professional function that is not defined by gender.

The department will actively promote the role to a wider pool of male candidates, including those transitioning from other careers such as the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, emergency services, sports, and physically demanding occupations. These groups often possess strong interpersonal, organisational, and mentoring skills that align closely with SNA responsibilities.

This approach will be supported by a national communications strategy that presents the SNA role as a professional, stable, and meaningful career. Showcasing male SNAs currently working in schools will be a key element of this effort, helping to challenge perceptions and broaden appeal. At the same time, messaging will emphasise the value of care work across all genders, ensuring that efforts to increase male participation contribute to a broader cultural shift rather than reinforcing stereotypes.

7.11.5 Strengthening Diversity Through Recruitment Strategies

A coordinated national approach to recruitment will be required to broaden participation in the SNA workforce. The department will introduce multilingual and accessible recruitment materials as a standard requirement, ensuring that opportunities are visible to migrant communities and those for whom English is not a first language.

Recruitment campaigns will also reflect the diversity the system seeks to achieve, including the use of imagery and narratives that represent minority ethnic groups and underrepresented communities. This will help address the perception that the role is not accessible or relevant to certain groups.

Collaboration with Traveller and Roma organisations and migrant support groups will play a central role in outreach. Schools, particularly those in DEIS settings, will also be supported to engage directly with their communities to identify and encourage potential candidates.

Early engagement will be prioritised through school-based initiatives, including work experience and transition year placements, to build awareness of the role among younger cohorts and support longer-term workforce diversification.

As a practical step, the department will collaborate with relevant stakeholders to support the Traveller and Roma communities by providing SNA work placements through department initiatives such as the Summer Programme. This initiative will serve as both an outreach and capacity building measure, helping participants gain experience and fostering pathways into long-term SNA roles.

7.11.6 Training Supports to Promote Diversity

Diversifying the workforce requires not only inclusive recruitment but also accessible and culturally responsive training pathways. Schools and community groups emphasised the value of structured mentoring for new SNAs from minority backgrounds, particularly during their first year of employment.

Blended learning options, and community-led training models, delivered through Traveller groups, migrant organisations, or bilingual facilitators, can lower barriers and improve retention.

Such reforms, combined with improved national standards for entry-level training, will help create equitable pathways and support sustained participation among underrepresented groups.

Making the SNA workforce more diverse and inclusive isn't just of itself the right thing to do, it also helps schools support students better. A more diverse workforce reflects modern Ireland and helps to build trust with families who may otherwise feel disconnected from the education system. It strengthens communication, promotes cultural understanding, and ensures that all students, particularly those from minority or marginalised backgrounds, see themselves represented in the adults who support them.

Achieving this vision will require sustained, system-wide action: culturally competent schools; inclusive training pathways; targeted recruitment strategies; and robust mechanisms for monitoring progress. By embedding diversity and inclusion throughout the Plan, Ireland can build a workforce that embodies the values of equity, respect and belonging for every child.

Chapter 8

Pillar 5 Development of a Communications Strategy

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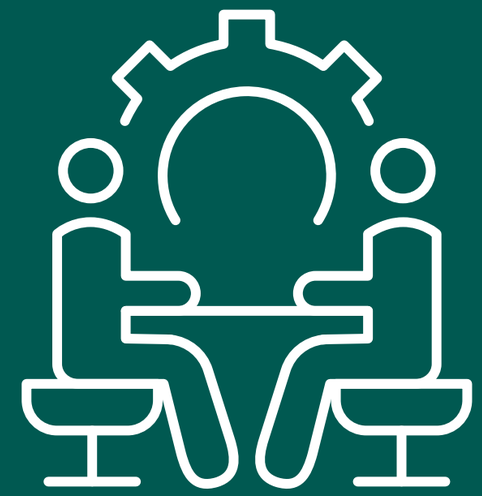


Communication with SNAs and Ongoing Development of the SNA Information Hub

8.1 Introduction

Clear, consistent and accessible communication is central to the effective functioning of the education system. This is particularly true in relation to SNAs whose work supports the inclusion, participation and independence of children with special educational needs across a wide range of school settings. As the department develops its first Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan the importance of a dedicated, strategically designed communications framework has become increasingly evident.

Pillar 5 of the Plan addresses this requirement by outlining a comprehensive, evidence-based communications strategy that recognises the complexity of the SNA role, the variety of operating environments, and the needs of a growing and diversifying workforce.

8.2 Policy Context

8.2.1 The Role of SNAs and the Need for Strong Communication

SNAs work is interactive, responsive, collaborative and often fast-paced. With the publication of the Plan, and through new training programmes, revised role guidelines, research-driven frameworks, and shifts in policy, the need for SNAs to have timely access to accurate information has become increasingly pressing.

At times, SNAs can be inadvertently overlooked in department policy when “whole school” approaches are being considered, with communications and guidance often directed primarily towards teachers and school leaders. This can result in SNAs not being fully included in key updates, planning processes or professional discussions, despite their integral role in supporting students with additional needs. Ensuring that SNAs are explicitly recognised and included in whole-school policy and communication is therefore essential to achieving a truly inclusive and collaborative school environment.

Generally, communication between the department and SNAs has been indirect. While Boards of Management and Education and Training Boards are the legal employers of SNAs, key policy information often originates with the department. In practice, this information has traditionally filtered to SNAs through school principals, management bodies, unions or informal channels. This system has resulted in variable access to information, delays in communication, and inconsistent levels of awareness among SNAs about policy changes, training opportunities and departmental initiatives. These findings are consistently highlighted in the department’s research in preparation for the Plan and in consultations with stakeholders.

Furthermore, ensuring that SNAs are well-informed, engaged, and have direct access to accurate information is pivotal to the successful implementation of the SNA Workforce Development Plan and achievement of its vision.

In August 2023 in response to direct feedback from the SNAs and with a view to addressing the identified communications gap the SNA Information Hub (the Hub) was established on the government website www.gov.ie as a single point of information on all matters SNA related.

8.2.2 Communication Challenges in the Current System

Research gathered in preparation for the Plan reveals a range of communication challenges that affect the ability of SNAs to remain well-informed. School leaders note the volume of communications to schools and the challenge of managing them in a timely fashion given other demands on time. A fortnightly summary of department communications has mitigated the impact. Where emails are received, many SNAs have limited time during the school day to read or process them, leading to gaps in understanding or delayed awareness of essential information.

Options for communicating with SNAs directly were explored for example generating a contact list and issuing periodic updates by email to each. However, bulk emails and newsletters, while useful, are often overlooked or deprioritised due to information overload, rendering them ineffective in fostering meaningful engagement. There is also a risk that where there is a delay in opening an email or where an older email is used as a source of information, that information may be out of date.

Maintaining an up-to-date contact list can be challenging as email addresses change, owners provide erroneous contact details or are locked out of their account. From an operational point of view, maintaining accurate and up to date contact information for a large workforce, presents significant resource and capacity constraints. This challenge is further compounded by the absence of work email addresses for many SNAs and the complexities associated with tracking and ensuring timely updates.

From a data protection perspective as the department is not the employer of SNAs direct communication of this nature is problematic. Compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation presents complexities in managing and storing personal data as there is no clear legal basis to share or exchange the data.

Another key challenge, beyond the use of email, is low awareness of existing communication channels. The National Survey of Special Needs Assistants found that only 38% of SNAs reported being aware of the SNA Information Hub, despite positive feedback on its value as a central repository of accurate and up-to-date information.

While many SNAs indicated a preference for receiving information through their schools, they also expressed a clear need for access to a reliable online resource that they can consult as required. SNAs emphasised that communications from the department should be clear, reliable and easy to access.

The absence of a centralised, department managed list of SNA email addresses, combined with the fact that SNAs do not work for the department itself, poses practical and regulatory barriers to direct communication. At the same time, focus groups with SNAs, teachers and school leaders reveal a strong desire for more direct access to departmental updates, training information and role-related guidance.

The most effective and sustainable approach to communication is through the SNA Information hub providing a central repository, where information can be updated regularly and accessed as needed. Maintaining its effectiveness as a communication tool will require continual monitoring to ensure information is relevant, accurate and up to date. In order to maintain traffic on the Hub it is essential that information is refreshed regularly which will require ongoing work. It can be complemented by webinars and use of other media to convey important information on new initiatives or matters of policy.

This approach will enhance the efficiency and reliability of information ensuring SNAs have timely access to accurate updates. Furthermore, it will contribute to the development of a more informed and connected workforce, fostering greater engagement and reinforcing the professional value attributed to the SNA role within the education sector.

8.3. Evidence Base for the Communications Strategy

8.3.1 National Survey of Special Needs Assistants (2024) and Focus Groups with SNAs (2023)

The national survey of SNAs conducted between February and March 2024 attracted 13,465 responses, representing 64% of the workforce. Of these, 7,401 were complete responses. The survey provides the first comprehensive national dataset on the SNA workforce and includes important insights into demographic characteristics, qualifications, working conditions, job satisfaction and communication preferences. In relation to communications, the survey shows that SNAs value information that is timely, trustworthy and accessible, and that a significant portion of SNAs prefer that communication from the department be routed through their schools or through a central online platform such as the SNA Information Hub.

Focus groups held with SNAs in 2023, found that there was overall agreement that a change in culture is required to increase respect for SNAs and value for the work they do. The use of the word ‘scheme’ in circulars was mentioned, and it was suggested that this descriptor should change. Subsequently the department has removed the term scheme from all new circulars published and discontinued its use more broadly. SNAs proposed the need for targeted communication to the school community on the role and duties of the SNA and how they work within the school community to support and enhance the educational journey for the students in their care e.g. it was noted that many including some professionals are not aware that the SNA is allocated to the school rather than the child.

Effective communication is central to the success of the SNA role within the school community, underpinning collaboration with teachers, school leaders and parents, and ultimately supporting better outcomes for students with additional needs. Clear, consistent and timely communication ensures that SNAs are fully informed, included in planning and decision-making, and able to contribute effectively as part of a multidisciplinary team.

A strong professional relationship with principals and senior leadership supports clarity of roles, shared understanding of student needs, and alignment with whole-school priorities. However, the survey findings indicate a significant deficit in structured engagement in this area. Almost half (49%) of SNAs reported receiving no feedback on their performance, while for those who did, feedback was predominantly informal rather than part of a planned performance management process. Only a small proportion (14%) experienced scheduled, structured meetings, and although some regular interaction occurs, a notable cohort (18%) rarely receive feedback at all. This lack of consistent, formalised communication can weaken professional support and limit opportunities for development. Strengthening structured communication and performance feedback mechanisms between SNAs and school leadership is therefore critical to enhancing both individual practice and overall school outcomes.

Communication with other SNAs plays a vital role in fostering peer support and shared learning. In the focus groups participants noted that these sessions provided the first opportunity for SNAs from various school settings to meet, discuss and share information, highlighting the potential value of communities of practice to enable SNAs to build relationships and access additional sources of information and support. Building on this, work under Pillar 3 has incorporated in-person training sessions as part of the course content for the SNA National Training Programme. In addition to providing practical training it is designed to foster communities of practice, provide SNAs with peer-to-peer learning experiences and create tangible supports for them.

When combined with strong communication structures between SNAs, teachers, school leaders and parents, these approaches promote a more cohesive, informed and collaborative school environment, enhance understanding of the SNA role, and support consistent, high-quality provision for students.

These findings confirm the need for a communications strategy grounded in accessible digital infrastructure, supported by schools, and informed by the lived experience of SNAs.

8.3.2 Working Group on the Development of a Communications Strategy

Between September 2024 and May 2025, the Pillar 5 working group met multiple times to discuss communication needs related to the SNAWDP. These meetings brought together department staff, school management bodies, union representatives, NCSE staff and SNA representatives. Discussions at these meetings reflect a detailed and collaborative exploration of the challenges and opportunities within the current system. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of providing SNAs with clear, rational explanations for policy decisions, ensuring that messaging is consistent across all partners, and communicating changes in a way that respects the practical constraints of school life.

The Working Group also highlighted the need for improved communication to parents and broader school communities about the SNA role. Misunderstandings about the duties and responsibilities of SNAs persist, reinforcing the need for high-quality, accessible communication materials that explain the purpose and scope of the SNA role to school communities.

8.3.3 Feedback from School Communities and Stakeholder Bodies

Research undertaken for the Plan indicates that communication practices vary widely between schools. In some schools, SNAs are fully integrated into staff meetings, planning processes and communication systems; in others, SNAs report limited involvement or inconsistent access to essential information. Teachers and school leaders note the practical challenges of finding time during the school day to share and discuss new information. These pressures are compounded in smaller schools where principals also have full teaching responsibilities. Focus Groups held with teachers proposed that there is a need for measures to promote understanding of the SNA role and these must also be considered as part of the communications strategy under pillar five of the Plan.

There is strong recognition among stakeholders that communication within school settings must become more structured, supported and sustainable. This includes clear induction procedures, regular and scheduled opportunities for teacher and SNA collaboration, and the provision of templates and guidance to support consistent practice in every school.

8.4. Strategic Direction for Communications

The overarching aim of the department's communications strategy for the SNA Workforce Development Plan is to create a more informed, more connected and more empowered SNA workforce. To achieve this, the strategy emphasises clarity, equity of access, bilingual delivery, digital innovation and collaboration with all relevant stakeholders. Additionally, many of the communication needs that have been indicated by stakeholders will be addressed under Pillar 3 of the Plan.

Rather than relying on a single channel, the strategy adopts a multi-layered communications model that combines centralised digital resources, school-mediated communication, stakeholder engagement and ongoing two-way interaction with SNAs themselves.

At the centre of the model is the SNA Information Hub, which serves as the authoritative source for all role-related information. This Hub will be supported by regular webinars, accessible video content, FAQs, Irish-language materials, and enhanced search features to make information easy to locate and understand.

The strategy also recognises the importance of building understanding beyond the SNA workforce. Parents, teachers, Boards of Management, SENOs and management bodies and the students themselves, all play essential roles in shaping the environment in which SNAs work. Communicating effectively with these groups is critical to ensuring that the SNA role is properly understood and valued.

A strong communications strategy can also play a practical role in supporting diversity and inclusion within the SNA workforce. Actions under Pillar 4 to introduce multilingual and accessible recruitment materials as a standard requirement will help ensure that employment opportunities are visible to a broader and more representative audience, particularly migrant communities who may otherwise be excluded due to language barriers.

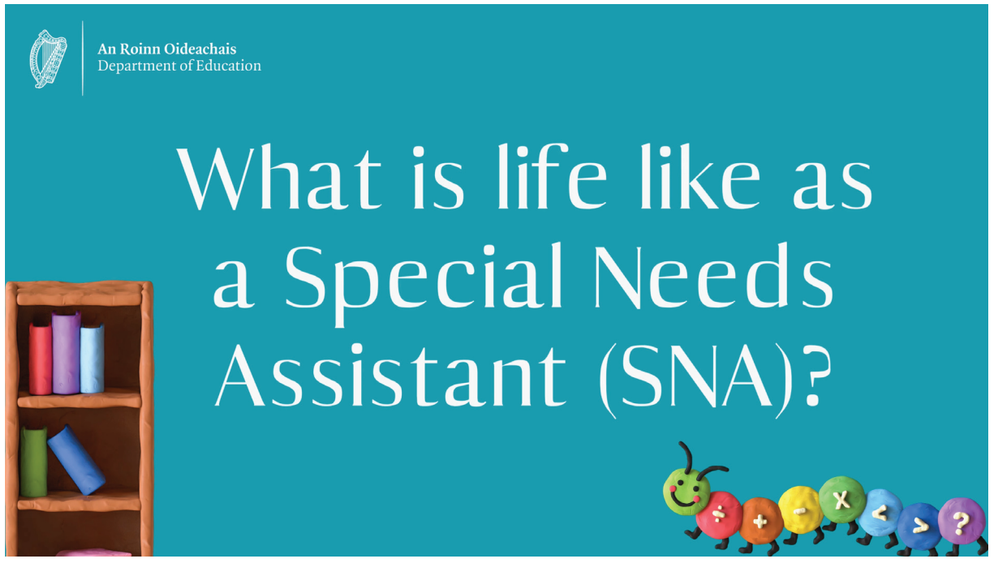
By proactively promoting the advertising of roles in multiple languages and formats, the department can widen the recruitment pool, promote greater cultural and linguistic diversity within the workforce, and better reflect the increasingly diverse school communities that SNAs support. This aligns with the broader objective of building an inclusive workforce and responds to evidence from the survey highlighting diversity gaps within the sector

Finally, the communications strategy is designed to support the ongoing development and evaluation of SNA policy. The biennial national SNA survey, along with data gathered through website analytics, webinars, stakeholder consultations and school engagement, will form a continuous feedback loop to inform future decisions. The commitment to ongoing research and evidence building is central to the department's long-term workforce planning.

8.5. Key Components of the Communications Strategy

8.5.1 The SNA Information Hub

The SNA Information Hub has already demonstrated its value by providing SNAs with a single point of access to guidance, circulars, training resources and policy updates. Engagement with the Hub has been strongly linked to targeted promotional activity. For example, significant spikes occurred following the publication of the SNA Survey Report, focus group reports, and the release of the "Life as an SNA" video.



To increase awareness and strengthen its effectiveness, the department will continue improving the Hub's design, accessibility and user experience. Current work includes a full review by user experience specialists, improved visual design, and the introduction of short "how-to" videos and explainer content. As the Hub becomes more widely used, it will serve as the cornerstone of communication with the SNA workforce.

8.5.2 Webinars and Digital Outreach

Webinars have emerged as a practical and well received tool for communicating with SNAs in real time. Two webinars delivered by the department in December 2024 attracted almost 2,000 registrations, with more than 1,000 SNAs attending live sessions. These webinars provided updates on the SNA Workforce Development Plan, addressed common questions, and strengthened direct engagement between the department and the workforce. A series of information webinars for SNAs will be delivered regularly, supported by written summaries or other content published on the Information Hub to ensure accessibility for those unable to attend live sessions.

In addition to webinars on the SNA Workforce Development Plan, the department will deliver an annual pensions webinar between 2026 and 2030, ensuring that SNAs, who often join the workforce later in their careers, have access to clear and accessible information on retirement planning.

8.5.3 Building Understanding Across the School Community

A significant element of the communications strategy focuses on improving understanding of the SNA role in the wider school community. Research shows that the SNA role is often misunderstood and seen in the context of how it appears in single school whereas we know SNAs support a wide range of needs from physical to emotional. The form that that support takes is very responsive to the needs of the child(ren) to which the SNA is assigned. To address this information gap, the department will develop video profiles and information clips that communicate the role in a clear and accessible way. These will be hosted on the SNA Information Hub and shared through established school communication platforms, as well as through NCSE channels.

Working Group discussions also highlighted the importance of clear messaging about the allocation model for SNAs. It was highlighted that there is a need to build greater understanding of the needs-based allocation of SNAs rather than diagnosis-led models.

Addressing these misconceptions is central to ensuring fair access and understanding and clearer guidance on this model will be published. The department will ensure that the NCSE publish updated guidance document on the SNA allocation review process that will provide clarity on matter and ensure that it can be easily understood by parents, SNAs, teachers and school leaders.

8.5.4 Communications Supports for Schools

Schools are essential partners in communication. This communications strategy recognises the operational realities in schools, where principals and deputy principals face significant demands on their time. To support schools in this area, the department will develop consistent templates and guidance for SNAs' induction, communication protocols, planning processes and teacher and SNA collaboration. Structures that promote inclusion of SNAs in the school community, such as regular meetings and shared planning sessions, will be encouraged.

8.5.5 Communicating in Irish

The objective of Government policy in relation to Irish is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language. The department is committed to promoting the Irish language and supporting Irish-medium schools and SNAs working in Irish-language contexts. To this end, communication materials, written guidance, policies and circulars, will be published simultaneously in English and Irish. This reflects the Department's commitment to promoting the Irish language and supporting Gaelscoileanna, Irish-medium schools and SNAs working in Irish-language contexts.

Working Group discussions highlighted the need to consider Irish-language training opportunities for SNAs in Irish-medium settings and this will be addressed in Pillar 3.

8.5.7 Ongoing Data Collection

The department will conduct a national survey of SNAs every two years, providing a continuous evidence base to inform policy and evaluate the impact of the communications strategy and other action under the Plan. Survey results will support long-term workforce planning and promote continuous improvement in both communication and practice.

8.6 Implementation and Monitoring

The implementation of this communications strategy will take place on a phased basis between 2026 and 2031, aligned with the broader Plan. Immediate priorities include enhancing the SNA Information Hub, promoting awareness of its resources, delivering regular information webinars, and establishing consistent bilingual communication protocols. Medium-term developments will focus on interactive tools, structured communication supports for schools, and the creation of user-friendly materials for parents and school communities. By 2031, the department will conduct a review of the strategy's outcomes and determine future directions.

Monitoring will be carried out through a combination of SNA survey data, analytics from the Information Hub, feedback from schools and stakeholders, and ongoing consultation with Working Group 5 and related governance groups. This approach ensures that communication practices remain responsive, evidence-based and attuned to the needs of the workforce.

8.7 Conclusion

Communication is the foundation upon which an effective and professional SNA workforce can continue to grow. The measures outlined in this policy document reflect a considered and collaborative response to the challenges identified through research and engagement with stakeholders. By strengthening communication pathways within schools, supporting bilingual access, and committing to ongoing research, the Department aims to build a communications environment that is clear, equitable and reliable for all SNAs.

This strategy represents an important step in supporting the professional development of SNAs, enhancing the functioning of school communities, and ultimately improving the learning and inclusion experiences of children across the Irish education system.

Chapter 9
Action Plan

Implementation of the Plan will be led by the department. An implementation team will be established to oversee the implementation of the proposed actions whilst keeping the Steering Group updated on progress. The department will ensure that the views of children and young people are incorporated at key stages of the implementation of the Plan. This implementation team will consist of department staff from:

- SNA workforce development unit, DEY.
- Inspectorate, DEY.
- National Educational Psychologist Service (NEPS), DEY.
- External staff relations (ESR), DEY.
- National Council for Special Education (NCSE).
- Management bodies representatives from primary and post-primary sector.
- Trade union representative for SNAs.

Actions

Actions were developed for inclusion in the Plan under each of the five pillars. These include details on the scope, description, objectives, outcomes, deliverables, and critical dependencies for development of the SNA workforce. The actions have been developed with reference to:

- Analysis of qualitative, quantitative and empirical research.
- Examples of best practice.
- Recommendations from the Working Groups.
- Feedback from stakeholder groups.
- Advice and guidance from the Steering Group.
- Support and advice from department's Management Board.

The list of actions proposed for inclusion in the SNA WDP are set out at Appendix 1 below. The majority of these actions are building on existing policies, systems and processes. All have been developed with a view to maximising use of existing resources and embedding the SNA role in a whole school approach to inclusion.

The proposed actions respond to the repeated demand from many stakeholders for increased clarity on the SNA role. They will streamline processes, support school communities and deliver reforms to produce a more efficient and effective SNA service. The actions mitigate the risk attached to the SNA workforce arising from lack of governance and quality assurance for the SNA Workforce.

The actions table sets out the pathway for implementation, including a breakdown of the necessary tasks, sections/agencies responsible, the timeline for completion, and the resources necessary to deliver on each of these goals.

The unit does not anticipate significant financial implications arising for the department or any other department from these actions. However, any action which could give rise to costs in the future can be managed through the standard annual budgeting process for the department.

SNA Workforce Development Plan – Actions

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
Pillar 1 Review and Development of the SNA Role	Review and replace Circular 30/2014 and 71/2011	• Publish a new circular on the role and duties of the SNA to replace Circular 30/2014 and Circular 71/2011 with appropriate guidance and reference material. • One year post publication of the new circular a review the new School Community Time (SCT) policy and the new Learning and Development policy for SNAs will be undertaken. The review to be supported by a Department led working group to include department/ NCSE, school management bodies and Fórsa representatives.	Department of Education and Youth (department): • Inspectorate • The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) • Teacher and SNAs Terms and Conditions section The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Management Bodies Advocacy Groups Trade Unions The Health Service Executive (HSE) Department of Health	June 2026

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
Pillar 2 Establish a Quality Framework	Develop SNA practice guidelines	Publish practice guidelines for the SNA role and duties to include: 1. A set of standards complementary to the 'Looking at our Schools' framework setting out levels of achievement against which schools can consider how well they are performing in relation to support provided by the SNA workforce. 2. Indicators of effective practice to provide guidance on what effective practice in the SNA role looks like. Templates and guidance for an SNA handbook.	Department: • Inspectorate • NEPS NCSE	Dec 2026
2	Examine and develop Inspectorate procedures to include the work of SNAs in school evaluations and inspections	This will include a focus on how SNAs support the inclusion, access and participation of children and young people with special educational needs in their learning.	Department: • Inspectorate • NEPS • NCSE	2026-2028
2	Develop standard school complaints procedure for students and parents	Work with stakeholders to develop a standard schools complaints procedure for students and parents against the actions of a member of school staff (including SNAs) or policy of a school.	Department: • Parents and Learners Unit (PLU)	2026-2028

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
Pillar 3 Establish a SNA Learning and Development Programme	Department will Establish a Learning and Development Programme consisting of two Phases	**Phase 1** 1. SNA training and development to be delivered by the following organisations: • NCSE • NEPS • ETBs • Education Support Centres (ESCs) • Middletown Centre for Autism 2. Department to develop an induction process to assist schools to include guidance material and templates for school leaders and others. 3. Department to establish a SNA Learning and Development Technical Advisory Group to work on the standardisation of the QQI level 5 and 6 SNA course awards. This Group will: • Include representatives from: Department, NCSE, QQI, ATU St. Angela's and other experts in this area. • Ensure that the awards align with the existing and evolving needs of the SNA role	Department: • Inspectorate, • NEPS • NCSE OIDE Supporting the Professional Learning of School Leaders and Teachers Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) Middletown Centre for Autism HSE Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Atlantic Technological University (ATU)	2026-2027 (To note some actions will overlap and extend into Phase 2)

Pillar 3 Action continued

- Factor the modules and learning outcomes set out in the SNA National Training Programme which have been developed and reviewed to a high standard by experts.
- Ensure that these courses align with the Professional Award-Type Descriptors set out in the published guidelines.
- Develop a mechanism to assess prior qualifications, learning and experience including in relation to the equivalence of qualifications attained outside of this country.

4. Department and stakeholders to develop a Continuous Learning and Development programme for SNAs including guidance and support for schools, SNAs and boards of management.
5. Department/NCSE to explore portable and accessible means for recording SNA training.
6. Legitimate and accredited training opportunities to be listed on the SNA Information Hub on www.gov.ie.
7. Department to work with NCSE and HSE, where appropriate, to support schools in accessing and availing of targeted training resources for SNAs.
8. Department to work with stakeholders to support SNAs and schools with training on catheterisation and other significant medical care areas.
9. Department and stakeholders to collaborate with OIDE to:
   - to align training opportunities for SNAs in schools or other agreed locations with scheduled teacher training days including for school clusters
   - to explore opportunities for joint teacher and SNA training
10. Department to work with OIDE and other relevant stakeholders to develop and promote training opportunities for teachers and SNAs on how to optimise their collaborative professional relationship to provide the most effective service to students.
11. Department to collaborate with ESCI to develop appropriate training opportunities for SNAs and provide information, guidance and assistance to other ESCs including in rolling out of a community of practice model for SNAs.
12. Department to collaborate with relevant stakeholders including COGG to develop Irish language training for SNAs.
13. The SNA National Training Programme to continue until 2028, when it will be subject to a department review to explore its continued value to standardising the educational level in the SNA workforce.
14. The department will collaborate with DFHERIS around potential funding opportunities for SNA training and upskilling from the National Training Fund (NTF) and any potential for training opportunities with agencies such as Solas.

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe

3		**Phase 2**
		1. The NCSE will assume core responsibility for co-ordinating training for SNAs. The NCSE's role in this context will include:
		• Working with department and stakeholders to develop appropriate training opportunities for SNAs, including with the following organisations:
		  • NEPS
		  • ETBs
		  • Education Support Centres (ESCs)
		  • Middletown Centre for Autism
		• Providing training and resources to support SNAs in developing their skills and knowledge in relation to special education and inclusive practices.
		• Offering a range of learning experiences for SNAs, including seminars, webinars, learning communities, and associated resources.
		• Providing school-based support to help schools to address specific needs within their classrooms and across the school.
			Department: Inspectorate
			NEPS NCSE
			OIDE
			ESCI
			Middletown Centre for Autism
			HSE
			QQI
			ATU
				From September 2027

Pillar 3 Action continued

- Providing whole school training to include information and awareness on special education needs and inclusion.
- Providing guidance around training resources in relation to complex medical needs.Providing online videos and webinars on various topics related to supporting students with special educational needs, including autism, positive behaviour management, and assistive technology.

2. The department will establish a Quality Review Committee (QRC) to identify, review and validate training courses and upskilling opportunities for SNAs.
   - QRC Team Members will include representation from:
   - Department
   - NCSE
   - NEPS
   - Representatives from the school management bodies
   - QQI
   - Independent expert(s) in special education

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
3	Support diversity in the SNA workforce through training and development.	1. Work with stakeholders to develop and promote training for school staff on Equality Diversity and Inclusion 2. Work with stakeholders including QQI and course providers to develop flexible training options tailored to the needs of minority groups 3. Develop a mentoring programme for SNAs from minority groups to support their participation in the workforce 4. Collaborate with stakeholders to support the Traveller and Roma communities through SNA work placements in department initiatives such as the Summer Programme	Department: • Communications section • Social Inclusion section Advocacy Groups QQI School Management Bodies	2026-2028
3	Provide support and guidance on the SNA probation process	1. Develop and promote training opportunities for school leaders and boards of management on effective probation management. 2. Develop and promote training opportunities for SNAs to meet needs identified during the probation process	School Management Bodies	2026-2027

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
Pillar 4 Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity	Raise minimum educational requiremen t for entry to SNA role	1. **A**: Publish policy to raise minimum educational requirement for SNAs to NFQ Level 5 award. Serving SNAs to attain minimum level 5 award within 5 years of the publication of the Plan.**B**: After 5 years raise minimum educational requirement for new SNAs to minimum level 6 minor award. All serving SNAs to attain minimum NFQ Level 6 minor/special purpose award within 10 years of the publication of the Plan. 2. Survey schools to measure levels of qualification in the workforce to provide accurate data for planning the proposed measures. 3. Design and develop a communications campaign to explain the rationale for the chosen approach to the minimum educational qualifications. 4. Provide support and guidance to the SNA workforce to encourage co-operation including a FAQ document on the changes to avoid misinformation and speculation.		2027-2037

Pillar 4 Action continued

5. Provide guidance to schools and SNAs on where they can locate accredited SNA courses which meet eligibility requirements for the SNA role.
6. Develop a mechanism to assess the equivalence of qualifications attained outside of this country.
7. Develop procedures to measure compliance with the new requirements.

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
4	Promoting Diversity in the SNA Workforce	1. Work with stakeholders to develop and promote multilingual advertisements and promotional materials for SNA posts. 2. Work with stakeholders to increase diversity in interview boards for SNA posts. 3. Work with stakeholders to develop training on unconscious bias for interview boards and boards of management.	Department: • Communications section • Special Education Division School Management Bodies Trade Unions	2026-2027
4	Deliver a centralised approach to garda vetting	1. Work with stakeholders to deliver a centralised approach to garda vetting for SNAs.	Department: • Legal Services unitNCSE	2026-2028
4	Support for an effective recruitment strategy	1. Undertake a review of Circular 0051/2019 – Recruitment and Appointment Procedures for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). 2. Work with stakeholders to provide guidance and templates to support the SNA recruitment process.	Department: • Teachers/SNA Terms and Conditions Section. • Communications section. School Management Bodies Trade Unions	2026-2028

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
		3. Develop resources for prospective SNAs to assist with understanding and preparation for the SNA recruitment process		
4	Publish the updated employment contract for SNAs	1. Publish new circular and contract in line with the commitment under the Public Service Agreement 2024 to 2026. 2. Work with stakeholders to provide guidance and templates to schools and SNAs on the revised SNA contract arrangements.	Department: • Legal Services unit School Management Bodies Trade Unions	2026
4	Support SNA retention	1. Work with stakeholders to record and monitor relevant workforce data with a view to mitigating emerging challenges impacting on future workforce needs. 2. Work with stakeholders to promote the SNA role as a career among school leavers and others to offset a retirement cliff in the coming years.	Department: • Statistics section • Communications section School Management Bodies	2026-2030
4	Develop an SNA redeployment scheme	1. Develop and implement a SNA Redeployment scheme to allow SNAs in posts which become surplus to be redeployed to a school which has a vacant post. 2. Develop appropriate training opportunities for SNAs who move to	NCSE School Management Bodies Trade Unions	2026-2028

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
		new school settings under the SNA Redeployment scheme. 3. Develop appropriate resources to support the school community including SNAs and boards of management with the redeployment process.		
4	Provide Information and guidance to schools on managing the SNA probation process	1. Develop guidance material to support schools in managing probation for SNAs. This to include templates for a probation policy and supporting documentation. 2. Develop an underpinning system to record and mange probation management with appropriate oversight.	NCSE School Management Bodies Trade Unions	2026-2027

Pillar	Objective	Action	Key Stakeholders	Indicative Timeframe
Pillar 5 Develop a Communi cations Strategy	Establish and maintain an SNA Information Hub	Work with stakeholders to enhance and promote use of the SNA Information Hub to communicate relevant information and guidance to SNAs.	Department: • Communications section Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)	2026
5	SNA Survey	Conduct the national survey for SNAs biennially to support evidence based planning and continuous improvement.	Department: • Communications section SNAs Schools	2027-2031
5	Webinars	Deliver an annual webinar to provide Special Needs Assistants with an overview of the benefits and entitlements under the terms of the relevant public sector pension schemes. The department will deliver series of webinars on other information relevant to SNAs and school community.	Department: • Pensions – Non-Teaching Staff retirements	2026-2030
5	NCSE guidance document on the SNA Allocation Review	NCSE to publish updated guidance document on the SNA Review guidelines that will provide clarity on matter and ensure that it can be easily understood by parents, SNAs, teachers and school leaders.	NCSE	2026-2030
	Irish Language	The department will ensure that it will promote the proficiency of SNAs in the Irish language, and the requirement for simultaneous delivery of communications and documents in Irish and in English.	Department	2026-2030

Appendicies

Appendix 1
Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference for Steering Group

Background

1. Special needs assistants (SNAs) make a valuable contribution to our school communities by providing adult support to enable students with significant care needs attend mainstream education, special classes and special schools. Such support plays a central role in ensuring minimum disruption to class or teaching time for the students concerned or for their peers. The SNA will also strive to help the students develop independent living skills. At present there are over 20,000 SNAs working in our schools.
2. Established in December 2022, the SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) within the Special Education Division of the Department of Education (DE), was set up to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required. Since then, the SNAWDU has prioritised a review of the SNA contract (a commitment under the Building Momentum public service pay agreement) and work on a learning and development programme for SNAs.
3. Stakeholder engagement in the course of this work indicated a need to develop a broader strategic initiative and in September 2023 Management Board approval was secured to develop the first SNA Workforce Development Plan ('the Plan').

The Purpose for the Plan

4. the Plan will bring clarity and direction to the SNA service into the future and ensure that this workforce is prepared for the changing and emerging needs of students with significant care needs in order for them to access education to reach their potential.
5. the Plan will develop a 'vision' for the future of the SNA service based on research and analysis of the workforce and strategic planning, setting out clear objectives and achievable goals. the Plan will be developed in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders including the SNAs, school management bodies, trade unions, schools, parents and children.

Developing the Plan

6. the Plan will be developed in 3 phases: Phase 1 – Research and Analysis, Phase 2 – Collaboration and Planning and Phase 3 – Implementation and Review.

7. Research and analysis carried out in Phase 1, which is already underway, will be considered in the context of the vision for the SNA Workforce and will form the basis for themes to be addressed in Phase 2. These themes are set out under 5 separate pillars, as follows:

- Pillar 1 – Review and Development of the SNA role.
- Pillar 2 – Establishment of a Quality Assurance Framework.
- Pillar 3 – Establishment of an SNA Learning and Development Programme.
- Pillar 4 – Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.
- Pillar 5 – Development of a Communications Strategy.

Role of the Steering Group

8. A Steering Group is being established to advise, monitor and oversee the development, coordination and implementation of the Plan. The Steering Group will report to the Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion.
9. The Steering Group will ensure that the high-level stakeholders and experts in this field agree on all aspects of the Plan including decision making, planning and implementation.
10. The Group will have the following functions:

    i) Agree on membership of the Working and Stakeholder Groups and roles within each.

    ii) Provide a forum where proposals from the Working Groups and any other relevant policy issues are discussed, clarified and approved.

    iii) Direct the collection and analysis of required data and information.

    iv) Review the framework around the Plan and ensure that all goals, actions and timeframes are realistic and achievable.

    v) Identify key progress indicators and deadlines for actions.

    vi) Monitor and review progress on actions and provide any necessary guidance and support.

11. Each of the Steering Group members will enjoy equal standing with each free to propose issues for discussion. Membership of the Steering Group shall be on a voluntary basis. Any costs incurred by members in associated activities shall be borne by the members or their parent organisations.

Membership

12. The Steering Group acting on behalf of the Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion shall comprise senior officials from relevant Government Departments, external experts and representatives of advocacy organisations, as set out below. It will be chaired by Martina Mannion, Assistant Secretary General at the Department of Education with responsibility for Special Education.

    - Martina Mannion, Assistant Secretary General, Special Education, DE
    - Angela Corcoran, Principal Officer, DE
    - Della Sammon, Assistant Principal Officer, DE
    - Kate Halpin, Assistant Principal Officer, DE
    - Paul Gleeson, DCEDIY
    - Mairead Daly, ESR, DE
    - John Kearney, CEO of NCSE
    - Anne Tansey, Director of NEPS
    - Yvonne Keating, Chief Inspector, DE
    - Brian MacGiollaPhadraig, Assistant Chief Inspector, DE
    - Dr. Claire Griffin, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
    - Dr. Margaret Rogers, former National Manager of Better Start
    - Noel Sweeney, Communications Unit, DE

Meeting Schedule

13. It is anticipated that the Steering Group will meet monthly initially and thereafter quarterly or otherwise as agreed. A schedule of meetings will be agreed at the initial meeting of the group.

14. The administration support for all of the groups will be provided by the SNAWDU.

15. The agenda for the meetings will be set by the chairperson, having consulted via the secretary of the group with the other members in advance of each meeting. Meeting minutes will be circulated within one week of the meeting date. The agenda will be provided at least one week in advance of the scheduled date for each meeting.

16. Minutes of Steering Group meetings will be approved under the 'silence procedure' i.e. a copy of the draft minutes will be emailed to members and if no amendments are received, the minutes will be deemed approved.

Working Groups and Stakeholder Groups

17. Five Working Groups (WGs), representing each of the five pillars of the Plan, with agreed Terms of Reference will be established to support the Steering Group (SG) in carrying out its functions. The WGs will report to the SG.

18. The WGs may, with the approval of the SG establish such sub-groups or employ such experts as may be required to examine certain themes relevant to the pillars of the SNA Workforce Development Plan. Such subgroups and experts will report to the WG unless otherwise agreed by the SG. Each sub-group/expert will be provided with separate terms of reference and timeframes for their work.

19. Two Stakeholder Groups will be established to consider proposals from the WGs and to provide constructive feedback before proposals are presented to the SG.

    a) The General Stakeholder Group will comprise representation from all stakeholders including SNAs to provide input to the WGs and feedback on proposals.

    b) A separate SNA Stakeholder Group will be convened quarterly which will comprise SNAs from a variety of school settings and which will provide information and insight on the extent to which the strategic direction aligns with practical experience of the role.

Terms of Reference for Working Groups

Background

1. Special needs assistants (SNAs) make a valuable contribution to our school communities by providing adult support to enable students with significant care needs attend mainstream education, special classes and special schools. Such support plays a central role in ensuring minimum disruption to class or teaching time for the students concerned or for their peers. The SNA will also strive to help the students develop independent living skills. At present there are over 20,000 SNAs working in our schools.
2. Established in December 2022, the SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) within the Special Education Division of the Department of Education (DE), was set up to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required. Since then the SNAWDU has prioritised a review of the SNA contract (a commitment under the Building Momentum public service pay agreement) and work on a learning and development programme for SNAs.
3. Stakeholder engagement in the course of this work indicated a need to develop a broader strategic initiative and in September 2023 Management Board approval was secured to develop the first SNA Workforce Development Plan ('the Plan') over the following two years.

The Purpose for the Plan

4. the Plan will bring clarity and direction to the SNA service into the future and ensure that this workforce is prepared for the changing and emerging needs of students with significant care needs in order for them to access education to reach their potential.
5. the Plan will develop a 'vision' for the future of the SNA service based on research and analysis of the workforce and strategic planning, setting out clear objectives and achievable goals. the Plan will be developed in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders including the SNAs, school management bodies, trade unions, schools, parents and children.

Developing the Plan

6. the Plan will be developed in 3 phases: Phase 1 – Research and Analysis, Phase 2 – Collaboration and Planning and Phase 3 – Implementation and Review.
7. Initial research and analysis carried out in Phase 1, has been considered in the context of the vision for the SNA Workforce and has formed the basis for themes to be addressed in Phase 2. These themes have been set out under 5 separate pillars, as follows:
    - Pillar 1 – Review and Develop the SNA role.
    - Pillar 2 – Establish a Quality Assurance Framework.
    - Pillar 3 – Establish a SNA Learning and Development Programme.
    - Pillar 4 – Support SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.
    - Pillar 5 – Develop a Communications Strategy.

Steering Group

8. A Steering Group (SG) has been established to advise, monitor and oversee the development, coordination and implementation of the SNA WDP. The SG will ensure that the high-level stakeholders and experts in this field agree on all aspects of the SNA WDP including decision making, planning and implementation. All Working Groups will report to the Steering Group.

Working Groups

9. Five Working Groups (WGs) have been approved by the SG, one for each of the five pillars of the Plan. The role of each WG will be to:
    - Develop policy and proposals within the scope of the key areas under the relevant pillar of the Plan.
    - Commission additional research, as required, to support decisions made.
    - Engage with the Stakeholder groups, as required.
    - Implement agreed actions.
10. Each of the WG members will enjoy equal standing. Membership of the WGs shall be on a voluntary basis. Any costs incurred by members in associated activities shall be borne by the members or their parent organisations.

Sub-Working Groups

11. The WGs may, with the approval of the SG establish such sub-groups or employ such experts as may be required to examine certain themes relevant to the pillars the Plan. Such subgroups and experts will report to the WG unless otherwise agreed by the SG. Each sub-group/expert will be provided with separate terms of reference and timeframes for their work.
12. Two Stakeholder Groups will be established to consider proposals from the WGs and to provide constructive feedback before proposals are presented to the SG.
    a) The Stakeholder Group will comprise representation from relevant stakeholder groups to provide input to the WGs and feedback on proposals.
    b) A separate SNA Stakeholder Group will be convened quarterly which will comprise SNAs from a variety of school settings and which will provide information and insight on the extent to which the strategic direction aligns with practical experience and knowledge of the role.

Meeting Schedule

13. It is anticipated that the WG will meet monthly initially and thereafter as agreed. A schedule of meetings will be agreed at the initial meeting of the group.
14. The administration support for all of the groups will be provided by the SNAWDU.
15. The agenda for the meetings will be set by the WG chairperson, having consulted via the secretary of the group with the other members in advance of each meeting. Meeting minutes will be circulated within one week of the meeting date. The agenda will be provided at least one week in advance of the scheduled date for each meeting.
16. Minutes of WG meetings will be approved under the 'silence procedure' i.e. a copy of the draft minutes will be emailed to members and if no amendments are received, the minutes will be deemed approved.

Terms of Reference for Stakeholder Groups

Background

1. Special needs assistants (SNAs) make a valuable contribution to our school communities by providing adult support to enable students with significant care needs attend mainstream education, special classes and special schools. Such support plays a central role in ensuring minimum disruption to class or teaching time for the students concerned or for their peers. The SNA will also strive to help the students develop independent living skills. At present there are approximately 22,000 SNAs working in our schools.
2. Established in December 2022, the SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) within the Special Education Division of the Department of Education (DE), was set up to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required. Since then, the SNAWDU has prioritised a review of the SNA contract (a commitment under the Building Momentum public service pay agreement) and work on a learning and development programme for SNAs.
3. Stakeholder engagement in the course of this work indicated a need to develop a broader strategic initiative and in September 2023 Management Board approval was secured to develop the first SNA Workforce Development Plan ('the Plan') over the following two years.

The Purpose for the Plan

4. the Plan will bring clarity and direction to the SNA service into the future and ensure that this workforce is prepared for the changing and emerging needs of students with significant care needs in order for them to access education to reach their potential.
5. the Plan will develop a 'vision' for the future of the SNA service based on research and analysis of the workforce and strategic planning, setting out clear objectives and achievable goals. the Plan will be developed in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders including the SNAs, school management bodies, trade unions, schools, parents and children.

Developing the Plan

6. the Plan will be developed in 3 phases: Phase 1 – Research and Analysis, Phase 2 – Collaboration and Planning and Phase 3 – Implementation and Review.
7. Initial research and analysis carried out in Phase 1, has been considered in the context of the vision for the SNA Workforce and has formed the basis for themes to be addressed in Phase 2. These themes have been set out under 5 separate pillars, as follows:
    - Pillar 1 – Review and Development the SNA role.
    - Pillar 2 – Establish a Quality Assurance Framework.
    - Pillar 3 – Establish a SNA Learning and Development Programme.
    - Pillar 4 – Support SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.
    - Pillar 5 – Develop a Communications Strategy.

Steering Group

8. A Steering Group (SG) has been established to advise, monitor and oversee the development, coordination and implementation of the SNA WDP. The SG will ensure that the high-level stakeholders and experts in this field agree on all aspects of the SNA WDP including decision making, planning and implementation. All Working Groups will report to the Steering Group.

Working Groups

9. Five Working Groups (WGs) have been approved by the SG, one for each of the five pillars of the Plan. The role of each WG will be to:
    - Develop policy and proposals within the scope of the key areas under the relevant pillar of the Plan.
    - Commission additional research, as required, to support decisions made.
    - Engage with the Stakeholder groups, as required.
    - Implement agreed actions.
10. Each of the Working Group members will enjoy equal standing. Membership of the Working Groups shall be on a voluntary basis. Any costs incurred by members in associated activities shall be borne by the members or their parent organisations.

Sub-Working Groups

11. The WGs may, with the approval of the SG establish such sub-groups or employ such experts as may be required to examine certain themes relevant to the pillars the Plan. Such subgroups and experts will report to the WG unless otherwise agreed by the SG. Each sub-group/expert will be provided with separate terms of reference and timeframes for their work.
12. Two Stakeholder Groups will be established to consider proposals from the WGs and to provide constructive feedback before proposals are presented to the SG.
    a) The Stakeholder Group will comprise representation from relevant stakeholder groups to provide input to the WGs and feedback on proposals.
    b) A separate SNA Stakeholder Group will be convened quarterly which will comprise SNAs from a variety of school settings and which will provide information and insight on the extent to which the strategic direction aligns with practical experience and knowledge of the role.

Meeting Schedule

13. It is anticipated that the Stakeholder Group will meet twice a year initially and thereafter as agreed. A schedule of meetings will be agreed at the initial meeting of the group.
14. The administration support for all of the groups will be provided by the SNAWDU.
15. The agenda for the meetings will be set by the Stakeholder Group chairperson, having consulted via the secretary of the group with the other members in advance of each meeting. Meeting minutes will be circulated within one week of the meeting date. The agenda will be provided at least one week in advance of the scheduled date for each meeting.
16. Minutes of the Stakeholder Group meetings will be approved under the 'silence procedure' i.e. a copy of the draft minutes will be emailed to members and if no amendments are received, the minutes will be deemed approved.

Appendix 2
Membership of the Steering, Stakeholder and Working Groups

Steering Group

Name	Representative Body
Martina Mannion	Department of Education and Youth (DEY), Management Board, Chair
Angela Corcoran	DEY, Special Education – SNA Workforce Development (SNAWDU)
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
John Kearney	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Anne Tansey Ellen Guerin	National Educational Psychologist Service (NEPS)
Yvonne Keating Nicholas Cosgrave	DEY, Inspectorate – Office of The Chief Inspector
Toby Wolfe Paul Gleeson	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Dr Claire Griffin	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
Mark Bohan Mairead Daly Caoimhe Allman	DEY, External Staff Relations (ESR)
Dr Margaret Rogers	Retired – Former CEO of Better Start
Brian MacGiollaPhadraig	DEY, Inspectorate
Noel Sweeney	DEY, Communications Section

Working Group 1 Review and Development of the SNA Role

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth (DEY), Special Education – SNA Workforce Development (SNAWDU), Chair
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
Aisling Muldoon	DEY, SNAWDU
Ania Carberry	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Cathy Goss	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Maureen Smith	NCSE
Niamh NiFhoighil Shirley Murphy	DEY, Special Education – Inspector
Caoimhe Allman	DEY, External Staff Relations (ESR)
Nicola Jones Anne Hughes Kazibwe	Health Service Executive (HSE)
Catherine Moynihan	Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
Suzanne Mullins	Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Andy Pike	Fórsa
Noreen O'Mahony	Fórsa, SNA nominee
Caroline Quinn	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Claire Burke	DEY, Special Education – Therapy Supports
Eileen O'Rourke Patricia Harrington	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Carmel O'Shea	Advocacy Services Manager, National Parents Council
Siobhan O'Reilly	Children's Rights Alliance

Working Group 2 Establishment of a Quality Framework

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth (DEY), Special Education – SNA Workforce Development (SNAWDU), Chair
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
Aisling Muldoon	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Nicholas Cosgrave	DEY, Inspectorate
David Kenny	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Eimear Coffey	NCSE
Barbara Nugent	NCSE
Niamh NiFhoighil Shirley Murphy	DEY, Special Education – Inspector
Christine West	Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
Andy Pike	Fórsa
Annette Murphy	Fórsa, SNA nominee
Paul Crone	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Claire Burke	DEY, Special Education – Therapy Supports
Caitríona Golden	Educate Together
Nicolas Cosgrave	DEY, Inspectorate
Dr. Rory O'Sullivan	Dublin City University (DCU), Independent Member

Working Group 3 Establishment of an SNA Learning and Development Programme

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth (DEY), Special Education – SNA Workforce Development (SNAWDU), Chair
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
Aisling Muldoon	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Barbara Nugent	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Eimear Coffey	NCSE
Niamh NiFhoighil Shirley Murphy	DEY, Special Education – Inspector
Paul Gahan Siobhan Regan	Health Service Executive (HSE)
Johanna Fitzgerald	Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Andy Pike	Fórsa
Carol McSherry	Fórsa, SNA nominee
Rachel O'Connor	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Claire Burke	DEY, Special Education – Therapy Supports
Susan McNamara Barbara Nea Thomas O'Neill	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
Eileen O'Rourke Breda Dolan	The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Alga Mulhall Roisín Morris-Drennan	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

Working Group 4 Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth, Special Education – SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU), Chair
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Ania Carberry	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kenny	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Andrew Torrence	NCSE
Nicola Maher	NCSE
Stephanie Kelly	NCSE
Kieran Rogers	DEY, Special Education – SET and SNA Mainstream Allocations
Mairead Daly	DEY, External Staff Relations (ESR)
Caitlin Reilly	DEY, ESR
Christine West	Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
Ann Marie Dillon	The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
Aileesh C Loughnane	Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Shane Lambert	Fórsa
Catherine Quirke	Fórsa, SNA nominee
Páiric Clerkin	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Deirdre Keane	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) representing Primary Management

Working Group 5 Development of a Communications Strategy

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth, Special Education – SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU), Chair
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Ania Carberry	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Eimear Coffey	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Maureen Smith	NCSE
Patricia Higgins	Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
Shane Lambert	Fórsa
Claudia Jennings	Fórsa, SNA nominee
Brian O'Doherty	Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Caoimhín Ó hEaghra	An Foras Pátrúnachta representing primary management
Noel Sweeney	DEY, Communications Section

Stakeholder Group

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth, Special Education – SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU), Chair
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Ania Carberry	DEY, SNAWDU
Aisling Muldoon	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Deirdre Matthews	Joint Managerial Body Secretariat of Secondary Schools (JMB)
Deirdre Keane	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)
Asiya Al Tawash	Muslim Primary Education Board
Jennifer Buttner	Educate Together
Eileen O'Rourke	The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Cormac McCashin	An Foras Pátrúnachta
Mary Jackson	The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
Suzanne Mullins Eileen Curtis	Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
David O'Sullivan	The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)
Ann Howard	Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)
Moira Leydon	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
Carmel O' Shea	National Parents Council Primary
Eilise McGarrell	Fórsa
Adam Harris	AsIAm
Paul Crone	National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
Dr Fidelma Brady	Down Syndrome Ireland
Derval McDonagh	Inclusion Ireland
Dharragh Hunt Robert Murtagh Rosalyn Tamming	National Disability Authority

Shari Irfan Jack Mc Ginn Preston Ó Caoimh	Irish Secondary School Union (ISSU)
Bríd Ní Dhonnchadha	An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)
Ultan Mac Mathúna Stephanie Keating	Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI)
Aisling Kirby	ACCS/JMB Further Education
Claire McCormack	Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland (SBHI)
Eimear Coffey	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Mary Collins	Principal of the Central Remedial Clinic school
Eithne Walsh	Féach
Danielle McLaughlin	The National Charity for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People(Chime)

SNA Stakeholder Group

Name	Representative Body
Angela Corcoran	Department of Education and Youth, Special Education – SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU), Chair
Della Sammon	DEY, SNAWDU
Kate Halpin	DEY, SNAWDU
Ania Carberry	DEY, SNAWDU
Aisling Muldoon	DEY, SNAWDU
David Kelly	DEY, SNAWDU
Leslie Sherriff	Special School
Sean Kelleher	Special School
Rory Silke	Primary School
Mairead Cullinane	Primary School
Leila Mandal	Post-Primary School
Katie Hyland	Special School
Valerie Grennan	Primary School
Bernie Gately	Gaelscoil

Notes

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