



Circular SP ED 0009/2009

Review of all Special Needs Assistant posts in primary, special and post-primary schools by the National Council for Special Education

1. Introduction

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has been requested by the Department of Education and Science (DES) to arrange for its Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) to review Special Needs Assistant (SNA) allocations in all schools with a view to ensuring that the criteria governing the allocation of such posts are properly met.

While reviews of such allocations in schools are regularly undertaken, it has come to the attention of the DES that there are instances where the work being carried out by some SNAs does not reflect the basis for the allocation of the post and where the level of SNA resources in some schools is greater than the proper application of the criteria would allow. This, of course, may arise for a variety of reasons. It may, for example, be a result of decreasing care needs of pupils arising from their maturation and development or as a result of effective interventions, which have successfully enhanced a pupil's independence. In other cases posts may have been retained when pupils who have been allocated SNA support have left the school. Schools are reminded that this role is a non-teaching role and that SNA posts should be actively reduced and withdrawn once the pupil's care needs have diminished.

Whatever the reasons, it is important to ensure that the work being carried out by the SNAs reflects the proper application of the required criteria as outlined in Circular 07/02 and that the number of posts in schools should be at the level required to meet the care needs of pupils consistent with the scheme's criteria. Similarly the SNA resources allocated to the school should be deployed and managed to achieve maximum efficiency within these criteria. The proper application of the criteria should ensure equity of treatment as between schools and pupils as well as ensuring that inappropriate allocations are not adversely impacting on other services within the education sector.

Priority within the budgetary process has been given to allocations for pupils with special educational needs in relation to additional teaching, SNA and other resources (e.g. capital and equipment). Sustaining this priority requires adherence to the criteria underpinning the allocation processes. Notwithstanding the possibility only a minority of SNA allocations do not meet the set criteria, it is necessary to ensure that the criteria are applied in the case of all schools and in a consistent manner.

2. Criteria

The NCSE operates within the DES policy. The NCSE is authorised to sanction SNA support to schools without reference to the Department on the basis that the Department's allocation criteria are strictly observed. The NCSE does not have discretion to alter the criteria. However, the SENO, through interaction with the school, direct observation of the pupil, discussions with parents and other professionals supporting the child, is well placed to make a judgement call on the care needs of the child in an educational setting and how these care needs can most appropriately and efficiently be met in a particular school setting taking into account resources already available to the school.

The criteria for the allocation of SNAs are set out in Circular SP.ED 07/02. However, the DES wishes to draw schools' attention to the following elements as set out in the Circular:

SNAs are recruited specifically to assist schools in making suitable provision for a pupil or pupils with special **care** needs arising from a disability in an educational context. Schools may apply for an SNA post for a pupil with a disability who also has a **significant** medical need for such assistance, a **significant** impairment of physical or sensory impairment or where their behaviour is such that they are a danger to themselves or to other pupils. Schools are advised that where an application relates to the management of a pupil's behaviour, there must be **clear** evidence that the pupil's behaviour is a danger to themselves or others and that **sustained** efforts by the school have not proven to be successful in the amelioration of such documented behaviours.

Allocations may be made on a full- or part-time basis and may be shared by pupils for whom such support has been allocated. Where pupils with special educational needs are in a group setting, e.g. in a special class, their needs are considered with reference to overall class group. For example, a special class for autism (ASDs) is typically allocated 2 SNA posts for every 6 pupils. Additional post(s) may be allocated provided there is compelling evidence to demonstrate that a pupil in that class has individual **care** needs over and above those normally expected in the majority of pupils with ASDs and which cannot be managed by the SNA support already in place.

There has been no change in these criteria and the current review will be carried out by reference to those criteria.

The Value for Money and Policy Analysis review of the SNA scheme currently underway is separate to this process and is expected to be completed by the end of 2009.

3. Outcome of Review

Decisions to reduce SNA support are taken by the SENO when s/he considers that the post does not meet the scheme's criteria outlined in Circular 07/02 or where the pupil has progressed in terms of his or her independence – this progression should be seen as a successful outcome for the pupil.

Teresa Griffin,
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