

Special Needs Assistants Learning and Development Focus Group Report



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High level of engagement by SNAs at the Learning & Development focus group in Cork Education Centre

Definitions

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| DE | Department of Education |
| ESCI | Education Support Centres in Ireland |
| SNA | Special Needs Assistant |
| SNAWDU | Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Unit |
| DEIS | Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools |
| SENO | Special Educational Needs Organiser |
| NCSE | National Council for Special Education |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |

Acknowledgements

The Special Needs Assistants Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) would like to thank all of the Special Needs Assistants (SNA) who participated in the learning and development focus groups for their open and constructive engagement and discussion. We would also like to thank the school principals and teachers who facilitated the SNA's absence, for their co-operation and flexibility.

SNAWDU are also grateful to Education Support Centres in Ireland (ESCI) and the Education Support Centres in Athlone, Cork, Donegal, Dublin West, Galway and Tralee for the use of their excellent facilities and for their assistance and support on the day.

In addition, SNAWDU would also like to acknowledge the assistance of colleagues in other business units of the Department of Education (DE) with the organisation and delivery of the focus groups.



SNA's providing feedback at the Learning & Development focus group in Cork Education Centre

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Background

1.1.1 In December 2022 the Department established a dedicated SNA workforce development unit within the special education section in order to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required.

1.1.2 The SNAW DU will adopt a more strategic approach to SNA policy development with the objective of developing an enhanced SNA service which delivers the best outcome for children with significant care needs in our schools.

1.1.3 One of the priority tasks for the Unit is to establish a Learning and Development (L&D) strategy for SNAs. The goals of the Learning and Development strategy are to meet the training needs of SNAs and develop their skills, knowledge, and competencies with a view to optimising performance, increasing motivation and embedding best practice.

1.2 Purpose

1.2.1 The focus groups were arranged to seek SNA perspectives on learning needs in their role, to identify any training gaps which exist and to explore opportunities to enhance their competence in the SNA role.

1.2.2 The SNA focus groups also provided an opportunity to discuss where SNAs are currently sourcing information related to their role, including information on the terms and conditions of their employment, as well as information on how to meet the needs of the children in their care. The focus groups further explored where SNAs would like to source such information and what format best suits their needs.

1.2.3 The evidence and insight gathered from the focus groups will inform policy decisions on a learning and development programme for SNAs. It will also facilitate tailored delivery of information relevant to the role in a manner which suits the needs of the SNA.

1.2.4 Importantly the focus groups provided staff in the SNAW DU with an opportunity to meet SNAs and through listening to their views, gain an understanding of their role and the manner in which they meet care needs in various settings. The feedback provided valuable information for other policy areas related to the work of the SNA.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Location

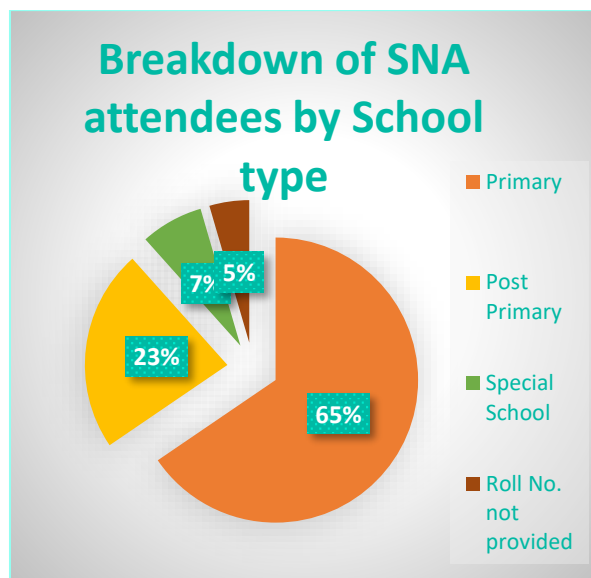
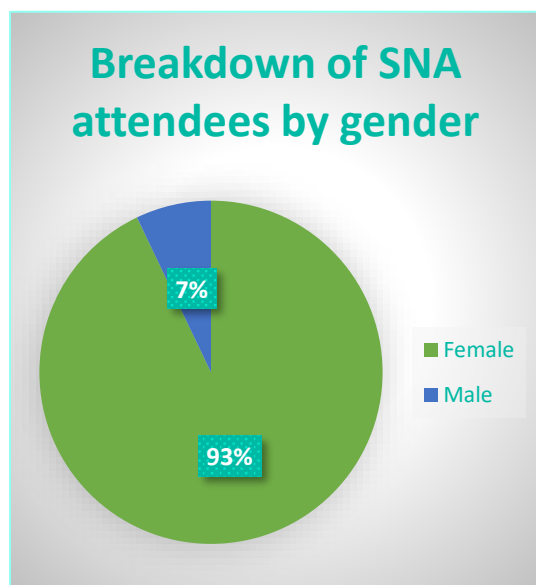
The SNAWDU engaged the assistance of the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) to host focus groups at Education Support Centres in six locations across Ireland, at various dates in May 2023. These locations were chosen with a view to delivering an appropriate geographical spread.

- Galway
- Donegal
- Dublin West
- Cork
- Tralee
- Athlone

1.3.2 Attendees

1.3.2.1 There were 310 attendees in total across all of the six locations from a variety of school settings including DEIS, Irish-medium, primary, post primary, special, rural, urban, small and large, single sex and co-educational schools. Fórsa, as the main trade union representing SNAs were afforded the opportunity to nominate an SNA representative at each focus group.

1.3.2.2 The following graphs illustrate the breakdown by gender and school type of SNAs who participated, which is broadly reflective of the distribution of the SNA role across the education sector.



1.3.2.3 The gender distribution across the SNA workforce indicates 94% are female. In terms of school type, 64% of SNAs are deployed in primary schools while 21% are deployed in post primary schools. The corresponding figure for special schools is 15%.

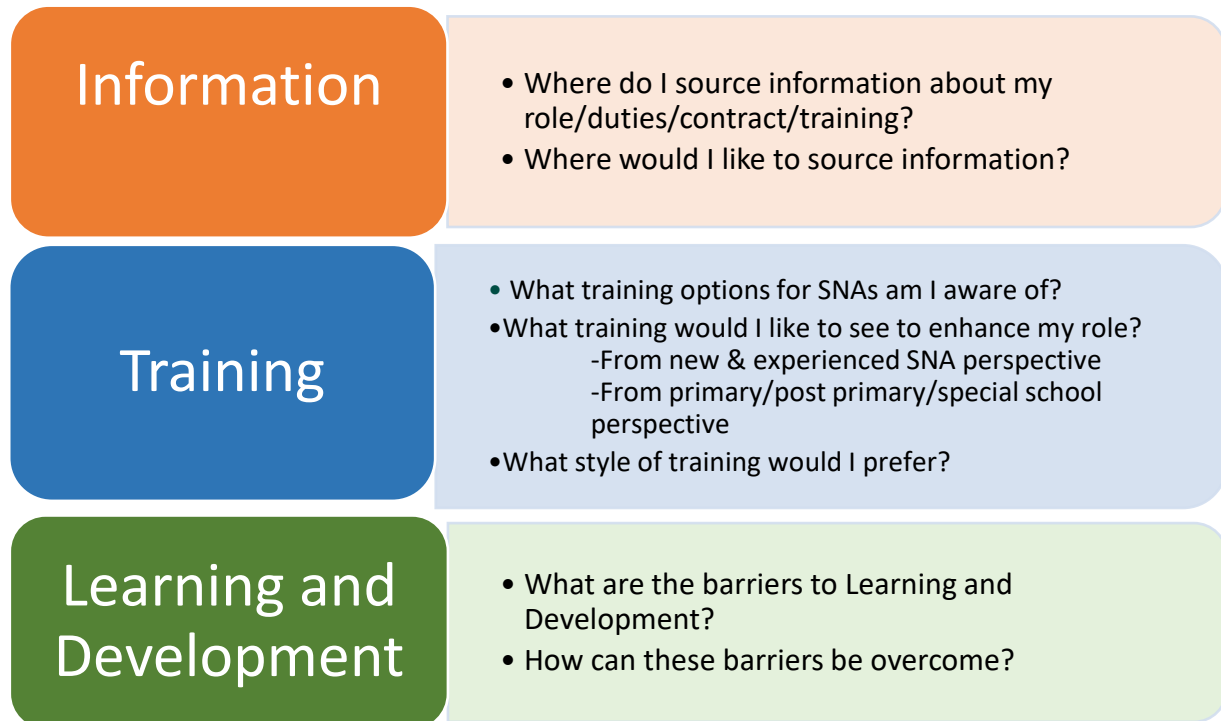
1.3.3 Actions

1.3.3.1 In order to convene the focus groups the following actions were undertaken:

- An invitation from the DE issued via the Communications Unit to all recognised schools with a request to notify SNAs of the focus groups and how to register attendance.
- The Communications Unit promoted the SNA focus groups on the Gov.ie website and on social media.
- The ESCIs promoted the focus groups and provided an online facility to register attendance. They also notified attendees once a place was allocated to them and provided a copy of agenda on behalf of the Department.
- In order to facilitate the widest range of views and experience it was requested that only one SNA per school should attend.
- Reflecting the importance the Department of Education attaches to this work, as an exception, substitute cover was approved for schools, where required.
- A morning and afternoon session was scheduled at each location.

1.3.4 Discussion topics

1.3.4.1 Discussion topics were presented with 2 to 3 key questions to prompt discussion.



- Participants at each focus group were assigned to breakout groups for discussion. Each breakout group comprised 5 to 10 participant SNAs with participants assigned randomly.
- Participants were encouraged to speak freely while respecting others' views when providing responses.
- Participants were asked to consider the perspective of SNA colleagues as well as their personal perspective in framing their response to questions.
- Each focus group agreed to apply the Chatham House Rule to encourage open sharing of views, comments and experiences. When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.
- Time limits were set for consideration of each topic
- A DE official acted as facilitator for each of the breakout groups ensuring that discussions remained on topic and all questions were answered. One person was nominated from each breakout group to record the data on a flip chart and at the end of every discussion each breakout group was invited to share the main points with the wider group.

- There was significant overlap of findings across breakout groups and each new point was discussed with the larger group to provide an opportunity to air any opposing view and to assess if there was consensus.
- The findings in this report reflect overall responses under different headings and subheadings.

2. Findings

The level of engagement by SNAs in the focus groups was excellent, with participants speaking freely and respectfully in their groups on the topics presented with guidance from the facilitators. The feedback indicated that as a whole SNAs enjoy their work with the students and consider the SNA role a rewarding occupation. It is also clear from the feedback in the different areas that schools, like other standalone workplaces, often operate differently to each other and consequently experiences can differ.



2.1 Sourcing Information

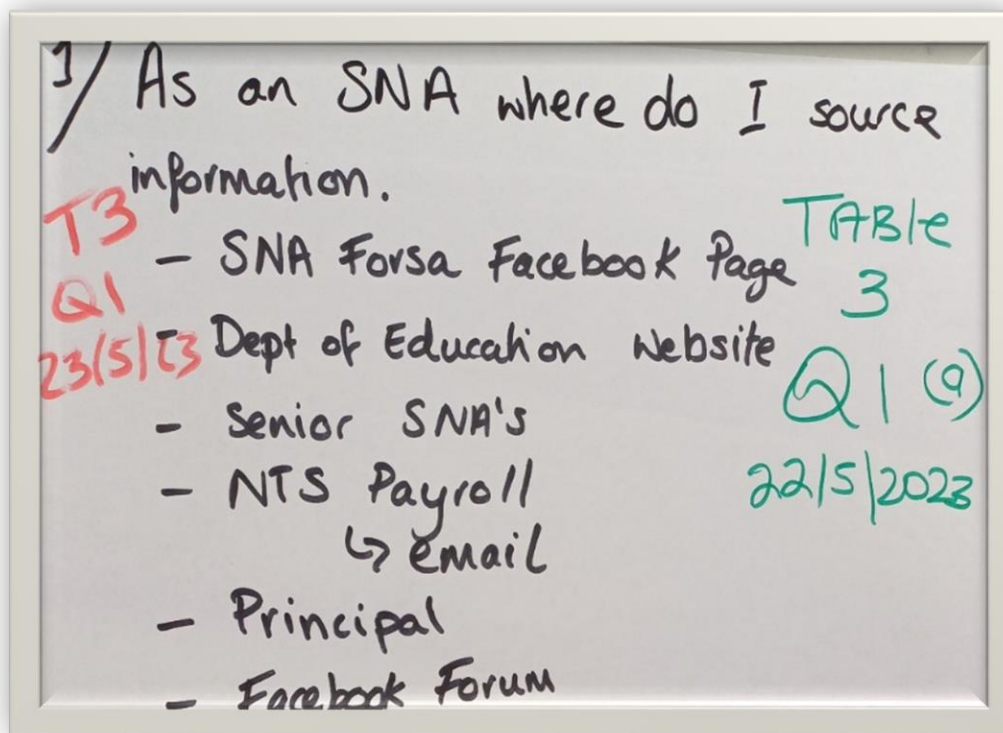
2.1.1 SNAs were asked where they source information, both in relation to their role i.e. their duties, school or contract, and in relation to addressing the needs of the children in their care e.g. training courses, school records, etc.

2.1.2 The key sources of information conveyed were the school, Fórsa trade union and online, including through social media.

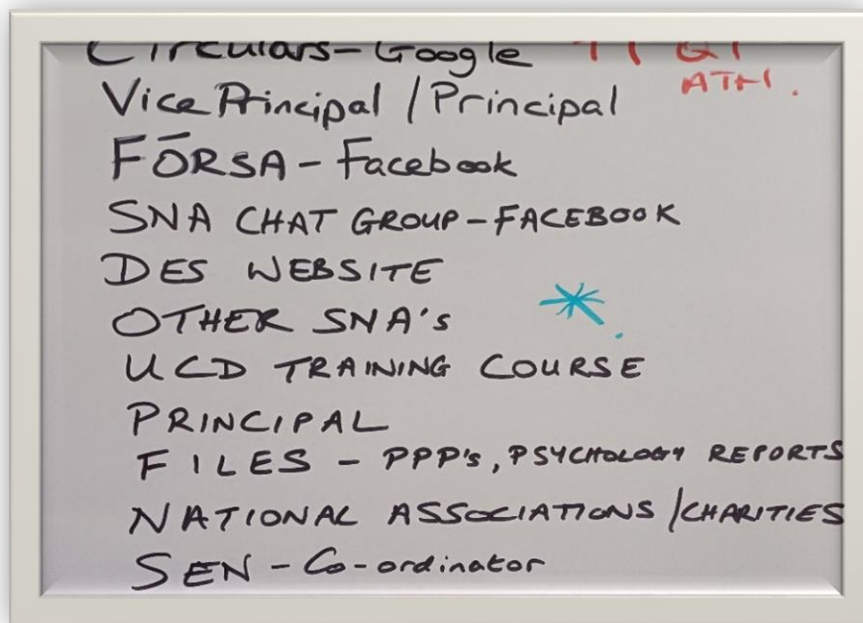
2.1.3 The participants also reported a wide range of other information sources. Social media and Facebook groups in particular scored highly were widely used and generally found to be

useful. However, some SNAs commented that this information was not always reliable and was used in the absence of any other reliable source. Many participants used Fórsa trade union as an information source, mentioning their Facebook group and use of the Kaizala App (for group discussions) as an information source.

2.1.4 While some SNAs indicated that the school (by which they generally meant the Principal or the school secretary acting on the Principal's behalf) is a valued source of information, this however was not consistent for all SNAs and varied between schools.



2.1.5 Many listed the Gov.ie website as a source of information but there was consensus that it is very difficult to navigate the new Government website and it is not always clear whether the circulars located are the most up to date ones required. It was also mentioned that the language in circulars is sometimes difficult to understand. It was suggested that examples could be used to good effect within circulars to communicate meaning.



2.1.6 In terms of learning about the needs of children in their care, SNAs tended to look outside the school and mentioned external courses as a useful resource. Some frequently mentioned examples are:

- Childcare and social care courses
- [Diploma in Inclusive School Support \(UCD\)](#)
- [Middletown Centre for Autism](#)
- [Le Cheile Online Learning](#)
- [Institute of Child Education & Psychology Europe](#)
- Training courses such as Lámh, Brain Calm and Six Bricks courses.

2.1.7 The Education Support Centres ([ESCI](#)) were viewed as a good source of information by many SNAs and were frequently attended. However, there are others who are not aware of the ESCIs or that they provided training for SNAs.

2.2 Preferred Sources of Information

2.2.1 The SNAs were asked where they would ideally like to source information in relation to their role, duties, employment contract, leave entitlements etc.

2.2.2 Participants are in favour of an online magazine or information hub for SNAs, to be hosted by the DE. This will address the consensus' view that it is difficult for SNAs to find

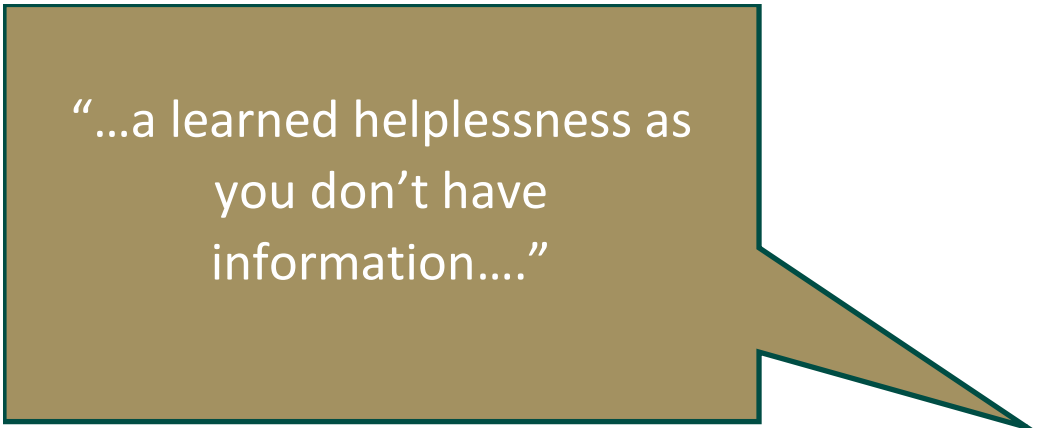
useful, reliable and up to date information. It is suggested that the following information should be included:

- Access to info on sick leave/bereavement/carers/maternity/parental etc.
- Up to date circulars (remove old ones) on SNA matters, including title of circular.
- Information on training and relevant links to legitimate agencies/courses.
- Recorded webinars/online courses.
- Links to ESCIs/Middletown Centre for Autism.

2.2.3 There is also interest in a space for a “Meet the SNA” feature introducing one of their colleagues and providing a narrative on their day to day experience in the role. There is also support for a discussion forum where SNAs could engage with each other.

2.2.4 Many participants advise that they often experience delays in receiving responses to queries on pay and conditions from the Department while others report that they address such queries to Fórsa. They indicated a need for an improved response mechanism in DE to address queries.

2.2.5 Increased communication with the Principal, the School community, the NCSE and parents was indicated by participants as essential to support and enhance their performance in the SNA role. Many SNAs expressed a wish for greater interaction with the Principal and class teachers to plan and review the needs of children in their care. Meetings at the outset of the school term or year, to develop strategies for addressing care needs and at year end for review were proposed. Some SNAs particularly those in special schools reported that this is the case in their school i.e. care plans are reviewed and amended on a routine basis, ensuring there is consistency and clarity of approach. There is a positive association between strong leadership provided by schools through the Principal, and SNAs who feel confident and competent in their role.



“...a learned helplessness as you don’t have information....”

2.2.6 Many SNAs indicated they did not have sufficient relevant information about students in their care such as diagnoses and records which are available to others in the school. For example, they considered they should have appropriate access to files (or a relevant subset of them) for children in their care e.g. on Aladdin or VS Ware, which would give them insight into behaviours, daily needs and support strategies with a view to providing a service appropriate to their needs. While some SNAs reported that such access is available to them, others reported providing care for several months to children for whom they had little or no information related to their particular needs or conditions. This is considered a barrier to providing appropriate care and a poor use of the SNAs' competence and skills. They also expressed a view that they should be included in relevant school staff meetings and meetings with the multi-disciplinary teams, where appropriate.

2.2.7 SNAs reported little contact with the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) or involvement in the planning, co-ordination and review of education supports to schools that enrol students with special educational needs (SEN). They do not have an opportunity to discuss their role or the needs of children in their care and this is seen as a gap in the feedback loop which, if addressed, may have the potential to contribute to a better SNA service. They also pointed to educational support they regularly provide to the children in their care such as help with spellings or reading and which must cease when the SENO is present as this is outside their role description.

2.2.8 Many SNAs outlined that they do not have an opportunity to discuss the needs of children in their care with parents and this impacts negatively on their ability to provide appropriate care. They proposed inclusion of SNAs in Parent/Teacher meetings or part thereof to address this concern would ensure a consistent approach to the care of the child.

2.2.9 Participants expressed a wish for regular communication and interaction with other schools and other SNAs. Due to the busy nature of the school setting, even in schools with significant numbers of SNAs, opportunities for regular interaction and peer to peer learning are limited. One participant noted that she worked in a large school with over twenty SNAs but she rarely had an opportunity to speak with any of them. Scheduled face to face meetings of SNAs and increased communication options including a chat forum and dedicated SNA training days were suggested as possible solutions.

2.2.10 There was discussion about the need for a SNA manager role in schools to provide direction and feedback on performance. Many SNAs feel this would provide a support mechanism which would facilitate greater proficiency and a level of confidence that they were

fulfilling their role requirements. It would address poor performance and provide a route to seek advice where difficulties arose e.g. in relation to role description, the correct approach to delivering care, etc.

2.2.11 Job shadowing, an induction booklet and a mentoring programme were also suggested as potential solutions to acquiring and developing relevant knowledge and skills. Many SNAs report starting a new SNA post without information on the care needs they will be addressing or information on the school's approach to delivery of such care.

2.2.12 The more experienced SNAs concurred, outlining how new SNAs can be unsure of their role and in need of a structured approach to induction to fast-track their progression to proficiency. This is essential given the frontline nature of the SNA role. Experienced SNAs are seen as a valuable resource in this regard and the opportunity to spend a day at the outset for experiential learning, where possible, is considered very worthwhile.

2.2.13 A mentoring programme where new SNAs partner with an experienced SNA to share knowledge, experience and advice was proposed. This is seen as beneficial to both the mentor and mentee. The mentor has an opportunity to develop their leadership ability and communication skills while the mentee is supported as they develop their individual competence. The cumulative impact of increased capacity and increased motivation confers a benefit to the school as a whole.

2.2.14 In some schools the SNA is provided with induction material which accelerates on the job learning by providing introductory information on the school and the role. There was much discussion on the usefulness of an induction booklet setting out information such as the school ethos, timetable, map, etc. along with relevant DE circulars etc.

2.2.15 Overall the discussion pointed to the long term benefits that could accrue from a formal induction process for newly appointed SNAs combining job shadowing with a mentoring programme and an induction booklet.

2.3 Awareness of Learning & Development Opportunities

2.3.1 In order to gain an insight into the type of training SNAs are currently accessing they were asked to discuss training courses and options they are aware of or had completed.

2.3.2 Across the focus groups the most frequent answers were as follows:

- Diploma in Inclusive School Support (UCD)
- Training courses provided by Fórsa comprising a series of one day courses for members who want to become more involved in the Union in their workplace
[Fórsa-Skills-Academy-Brochure.pdf](#)
- SNA courses at FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 delivered by ETBs, Institutes of Further Education, Institutes of Technology as well as private providers e.g. Progressive College

[Special Needs Assisting and Intellectual Disability Studies in Dublin - Sallynoggin College of Further Education: SCFE](#)

[SNA Courses Online | QQI level 5 & 6 Courses | Chevron Training](#)

[QQI Level 5 & 6 SNA Courses Courses | Progressive College](#)

[Special Needs Assistant - Carlow Institute](#)
- [St. Angela's - Level 7 Certificate in Special Educational Needs for Special Needs Assistants](#)
- Short courses delivered by Education Centres e.g.
 - Pathways to Inclusion of Autistic Students for SNAs
<https://www.edcentretralee.ie/cpd-courses-tralee-kerry/online-primary/2630-23tra214-5-week-pathways-to-inclusion-of-autistic-students-for-snas.html>
 - Manual Handling <https://www.fetchcourses.ie/course/finder?sfcw-courseid=379785>
- First Aid training through various providers including local medical staff
- [Lámh](#) courses
- [Middletown Centre for Autism](#)
- [Crisis Prevention Institute](#) training including on MAPA®

2.3.3 Other courses or facilities mentioned were Synergy Ireland, Optima, ICEP (Institute of Child Education and Psychology), Berry St, Brain Calms, Studio 3, Le Chéile and Neurodiversity training.

2.3.4 Overall, it appears that SNAs access training from a variety of areas including online courses and practical in-person training.

2.3.5 A number of participants advised that training had been accessed for students with particular medical needs from experts in nearby hospitals, paramedics and nurses who visited the school.

2.3.6 Some SNAs are very aware of the Education Centres and Middletown Centre for Autism while others have not heard of them.

2.3.7 While most of the SNAs appeared to be aware of the Diploma in Inclusive School Support for SNAs delivered by UCD and funded by DE discussions around this course revealed varying perspectives. Those who had completed the course were very positive in their feedback and found the course very beneficial to their role. There was discussion about the online delivery of the course which was seen by some as attractive in terms of eliminating travel time.

2.3.8 However, others expressed concern about broadband availability in their area and the lack of face to face contact with lecturers and other students, with the latter mentioned in the context of peer support throughout the learning process.

2.3.9 There was consensus that the course should include a practical element, reflecting the practical nature of the SNA role. However, there was also discussion around the challenge of attending for practical training, particularly for those living in rural or remote areas. The availability of regional locations for training was proposed as a solution to this.

2.3.10 Of those SNAs who had not completed the course there was some reluctance to enrolling on the National Programme for SNAs. When explored this seemed to arise due to concern about the level and type of course content, the supports that would be available, the time invested and lack of confidence in their ability to return to formal study.

2.4 Learning & Development Needs

2.4.1 The focus groups discussed the training and development opportunities that participants would like to have available to enhance their performance in the SNA role.

2.4.2 In order provide the richest information participants were asked to consider two distinct areas i.e. initial training requirements for a new SNA to support them in their role and ongoing training needs for the more experienced SNA.

2.4.3 Participants were also asked to consider the perspective of a SNA in each of the 3 school settings i.e. primary, post primary and special schools.

2.5 Learning & Development Needs for a New SNA

2.5.1 One of the most frequent suggestions in this category was a Job Guide or Information Booklet/Folder to be available in the school for newly recruited SNAs and substitutes. It was suggested that this might include information on:

- The school including ethos, map, and staff numbers etc.
- Employment and leave entitlements including a copy of the SNA contract
- SNA circulars
- Timetables
- Information on the role of the SNA in the school

2.5.2 Job shadowing, an induction booklet and a mentoring programme were also suggested as useful ways to support new SNAs in a school.

The timely provision of written information on the care needs they will be addressing and on the school's approach to delivery of such care is seen as a means of accelerating on the job learning and reducing the time required to achieve proficiency. In turn this reduces reliance on colleagues including other SNAs, the class teacher and the Principal, generating efficiencies and alleviating stress for all concerned. It is also particularly relevant for substitute SNAs in a school on a short term basis, optimising their performance. A readily available bank of information acts to facilitate competence, efficiency and effectiveness in the role.

2.5.3 Some SNAs also suggested a 'taster' or 'in-person' training session in the school before taking up the role to ensure the prospective SNA is suited to the role.

2.5.4 The more experienced SNAs participating in the focus group supported a structured approach to induction, outlining how new SNAs can be unsure of their role. Experienced SNAs are a valuable resource in this regard and the opportunity to spend a day at the outset for experiential learning, where possible, is considered very worthwhile. There was lengthy discussion about the difficulties that arise from SNAs not having a line manager whom they can consult for direction and feedback on performance.

2.5.5 Other training requirements indicated as essential for a new SNA included:

- Practical training such as [Crisis Prevention Institute](#) (CPI) training
- First Aid and information on medical conditions and terminology
- Managing schedules (for post primary children)
- How to manage flight risks

- How to read reports and understand the language used
- Child development and behavioural issues
- Cultural diversity.
- Toileting/intimate care
- Neurodiversity
- ABA (applied behavioural analysis),
- Complex medical needs
- Managing trauma.
- Assistive Technology
- Timely information on the child(ren) that the SNA would be working with:-
 - Advance meeting e.g. before term starts, with the parents and the child(ren) to get to know them and their care needs in a non-classroom setting
 - Meeting with the multi-disciplinary team for care planning.
 - Guidance on filling out PPP (personal pupil plan)

2.5.6 It was suggested that a minimum educational qualification should apply to new SNAs. This would ensure that entry level SNAs have a basic level of competence and are ready for on the job training.

2.6 Learning & Development Needs for an Experienced SNA

2.6.1 There was consensus that SNAs are often excluded from training in schools on relevant policy matters. Given their frontline role this generates a gap in the policy implementation process, often leaving them ill equipped to address critical issues. This contributes to what one SNA described as a “learned helplessness” where their training needs are not met.

2.6.2 The following key training needs were indicated

- Dealing with complex trauma: e.g. SNAs working with refugee children from war-torn countries, bereavement and tragic events.
- Supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools.
- Bullying.
- Child Protection.

2.6.3 Other proposals for training included:

- Medical interventions such as peg feeding and catheterisation.
- Intimate care needs.
- Aistear - learning through play.
- Manual handling appropriate to role – it was mentioned that the current offering of courses does not address SNA duties but is more relevant to other workplaces e.g. how to correctly lift boxes.
- Assault related training: participants felt that there was a lack of advice, training and support in this important area. They felt that this should be addressed to provide them with strategies to best protect the student concerned and other students as well as the SNA themselves.
- Diabetes.
- First Aid.
- Visual/hearing impairments.
- Understanding Dyslexia/dyscalculia/ADD.
- How to complete Incident Reports.
- How to enhance life skills/ independence for students.
- Recognising triggers in children with behavioural difficulties.
- Information on changes in policy or employment conditions for SNAs.

2.6.4 Refresher courses including those on First Aid and manual handling were cited as necessary. Courses in Assistive Technology were also seen as imperative to provide the best service.

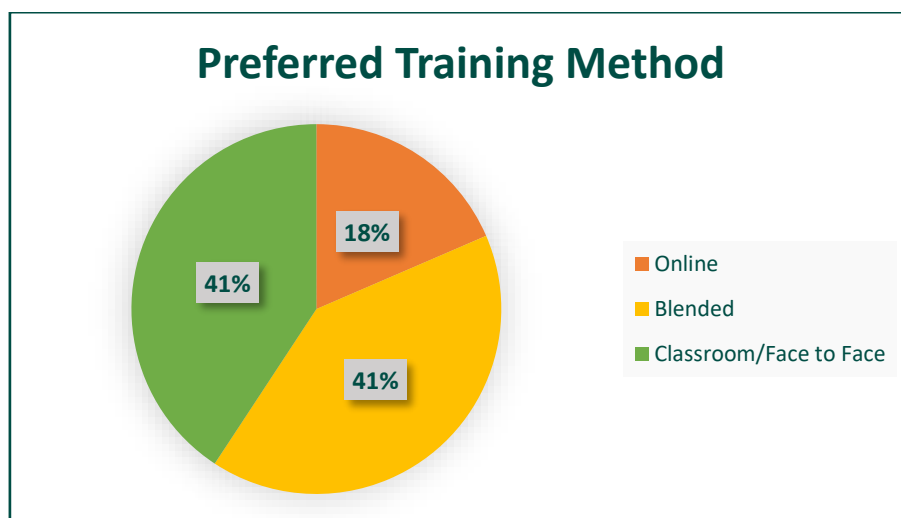
2.6.5 When asked to consider if different training needs apply to primary, post primary and special schools it was acknowledged that there are many common areas of training for SNAs in the three settings. It was agreed, however, that training is often focused on primary school children and there is a need for additional training for the post primary setting. There was broad agreement that the SNA role encounters new and complex challenges when working with adolescents. Targeted training should therefore be provided in the following area for post Primary Schools:

- Drug and alcohol abuse.
- Puberty and Adolescence (also relevant for senior primary classes).
- Anxiety, aggression & attitudes which arise during adolescence.
- Gender identity.
- Curriculum changes such as the new Framework for Junior Cycle (similar to training provided via the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) and new Leaving Cert.

2.6.6 It was also noted by many post primary SNAs that the content of the Diploma in Inclusive School Support (UCD) is more appropriate to the primary school setting and it was suggested that modules/electives could be included specifically targeting the post primary/special school setting.

2.6.7 SNAs feel that they do not get appropriate support in the area of wellbeing similar to that provided to other staff. They suggested that time to recover, debriefing and support from the school should be provided following 'meltdowns' or outbursts with students that involve the SNA. SNAs reported that very often they have to immediately return to class or are left alone when they may be shaken or upset from the incident.

2.7 Preferred Style of Training

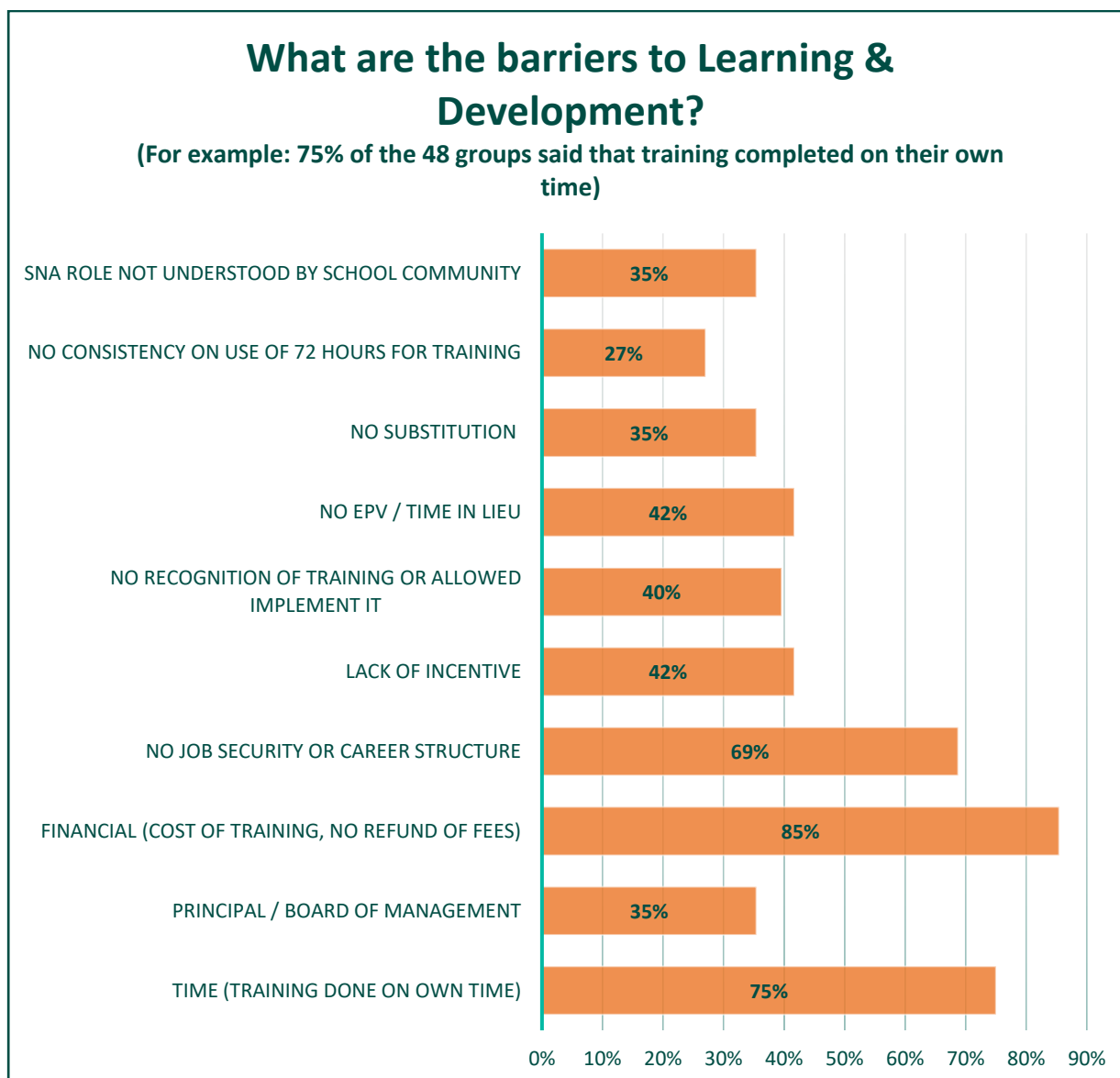


2.7.1 Feedback on the preferred method of training delivery indicates greater face to face interaction is required especially on practical elements of the SNA role. It was noted that in person training would facilitate peer to peer learning and also allow for SNA networking.

2.7.2 There was discussion on the importance of appropriate locations for training. The need for a wide geographical spread and the impact of travel time on work/life balance was discussed. The need for travel expenses and subsistence allowance for SNAs attending such training was also mentioned.

2.8 Barriers to Learning and Development

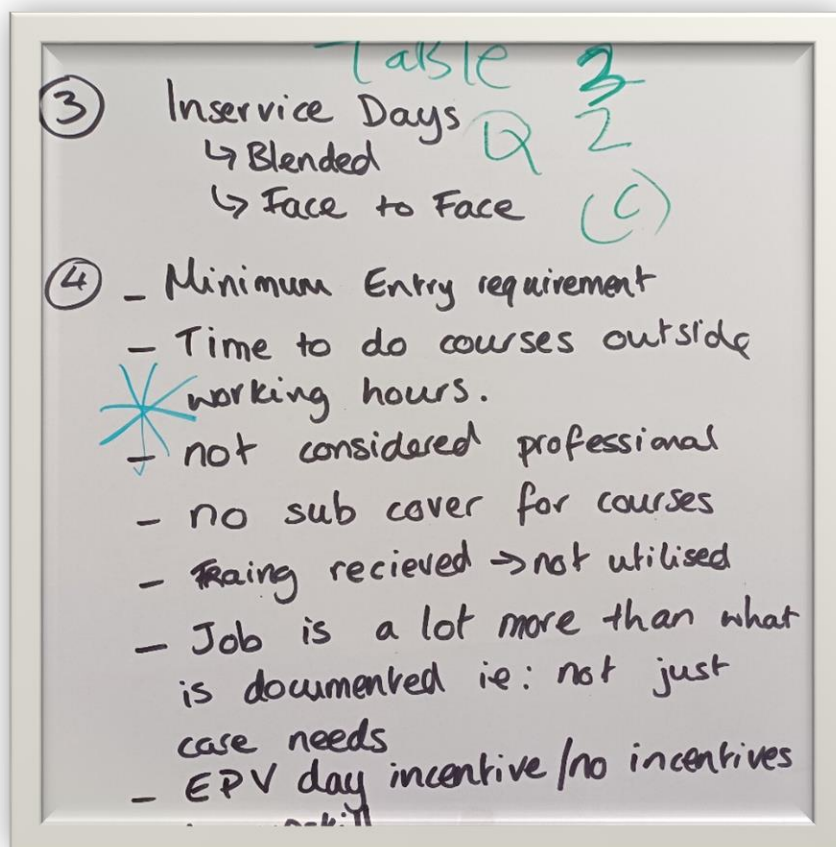
2.8.1 The SNAs were asked to consider the barriers to learning and development in the context of their own workplaces, careers and experience. They were further asked to provide suggestions on how these barriers could be overcome. They were asked to give examples of good practice that they had encountered and areas where improvement could be made.



2.8.2 Time was indicated as the greatest barrier to learning and development. The discussion around this focused on lack of time allowed for training in schools which means training is frequently completed in the SNA's own time impacting on their work/life balance. Many feel that in-service training days for teachers are an ideal opportunity to provide training to SNAs (either with or separate to teachers) but they are often excluded. While some report that their

schools provide training as part of the 72 hours in line with provisions in Circular 71/2011, others indicate this is not their experience and in their view this is a wasted opportunity. The experience for post primary SNAs is similar with consensus that more time should be allocated to training in June for the purposes of the 72 hours.

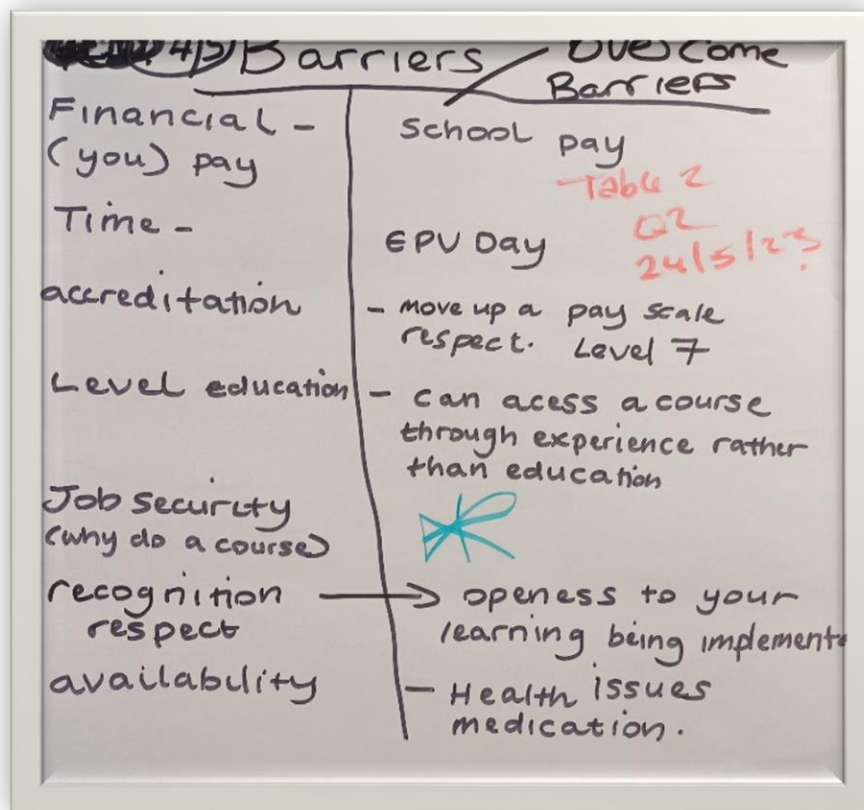
2.8.3 It was also mentioned that SNAs do not have any equivalent to the EPV days available to some teachers.



2.8.4 The second biggest barrier indicated is the lack of financial support available to SNAs for training purposes. The majority of the participants advised that they and their SNA colleagues have sourced and paid for training in a number of areas including accredited academic courses. The cost of training, which ranged from €5 for short courses to €800+ for academic courses, is often borne by the SNA themselves.

2.8.5 While some have received very effective training on medical care needs from local hospitals and paramedics etc. many state that they have not and were either trained by the parent of the child in their care or carried out the task on the basis of research they conducted

themselves e.g. YouTube clips. It was noted that this often generated anxiety, stress and fear in relation to these tasks.



2.8.6 Some participants indicate that applications to their school for course funding had been refused. While they considered that the training concerned would be useful in their role they were advised that the school did not have funding available. There were also instances reported where the principal and /or teacher would complete the training and the SNA would not due to limited resources in the school’s training budget.

2.8.7 As discussed earlier some SNAs indicated that the school principal is a valued source of information. However for some others lack of communication and support from the school principal as well as the NCSE and SENO was seen as a barrier to learning and development. Some SNAs indicate that they are not advised by the principal (or their representative) regularly or in some cases, at all, of learning/training opportunities

2.8.8 Communication between SNAs was also discussed in terms of peer to peer exchange of information and on the job learning. Due to the demands and frontline nature of the SNA role there is little opportunity during the school day for interaction with SNA colleagues which impacts negatively on on-the-job learning. There is a view that a student passport (or similar

type of document) with up to date key information on specific needs and strategies to address them would be a useful means of communication. This would be particularly useful for substitute SNAs, for change of schools and for transition between primary and post primary schools.

2.8.9 Many participants have already completed a level 5 or 6 training course and outline how many courses available are the same or lower level and therefore there is no incentive to complete them.

2.8.10 The SNAs point out that there is no consistent, structured learning programme for SNAs. They also state that in many cases useful and appropriate training carried out by the SNA provides information and strategies which are not allowed to be applied in the classroom. An example of this was outlined where an SNA who applied for, completed and paid for a PECS course, was not permitted to use this intervention in the classroom while working with a child with autism.

2.8.11 The SNAs advise that there is a need for more planned, structured learning for SNAs accessible to all, similar to the [Droichead framework](#) for teachers or by making the National Training Programme for Special Needs Assistants available nationwide to all SNAs.

2.8.12 There was discussion on how additional training or qualification undertaken by SNAs does not impact on salary or scale-point which was seen as a disincentive. This compares unfavorably with teachers who get Qualification allowances for academic achievement e.g. Diploma for Special Education and for posts of responsibility¹.

2.8.13 The higher age profile of SNAs was mentioned as a barrier to engaging in formal learning and development. It was noted that the SNA role is not viewed as an attractive job for many young people due to the lack of job security as a new SNA will start out on a fixed term contract for only one year and the Department confirms SNA allocations to schools on a year to year basis.

2.8.14 The minimum entry requirement for the SNA role is also seen as a barrier to learning and development. While SNAs feel that the workforce is very well qualified the minimum requirement creates an impression of an unqualified workforce and is no longer appropriate nor does it reflect the reality of a well-educated workforce.

2.8.15 A lack of respect for the SNA role was cited by some as an overarching barrier. The language and terms around SNAs including the actual role title (which some thought should

¹ [Circular 0008 2023 REVISION OF SALARIES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANTS \(SNAS\) UNDER BUIDLING MOMENTUM PAY AGREEMENT WITH EFFECT FROM 1 March 2023](#)

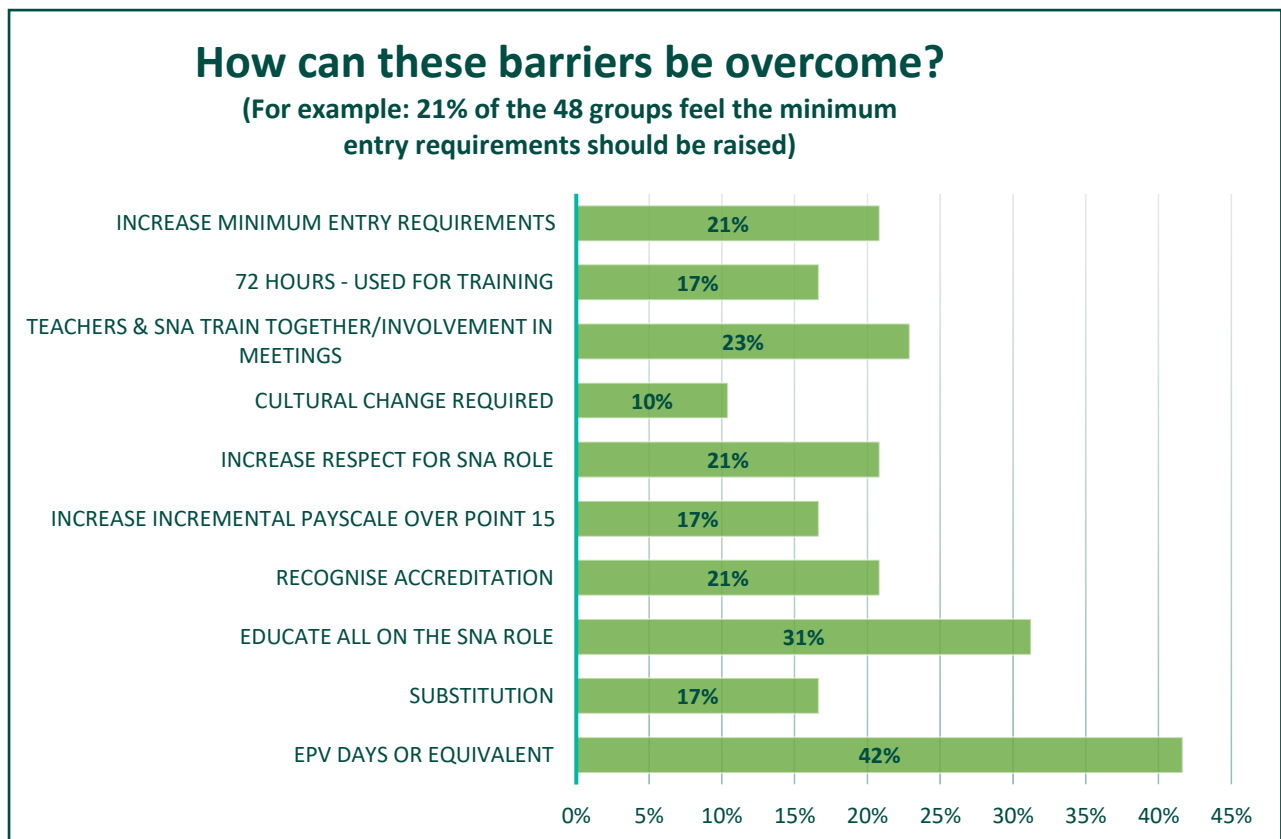
change) and the use of the word 'scheme' in circulars was mentioned. It was also highlighted that the role is not seen as a career and not readily available on the CAO which impacts negatively on learning and development as SNAs do not see any associated reward or recognition. It is principally their commitment to the children in their care which drives their appetite for learning.

“SNAs are not seen as professionals or treated with respect”

2.8.16 The lack of appropriate space in schools for training was described as a barrier by some SNAs. This is particularly relevant where the training relates to practical skills e.g. First Aid.

2.9 Overcoming the Barriers to Learning & Development

2.9.1 There was constructive feedback on how the barriers to learning and development noted in the previous section could be overcome.

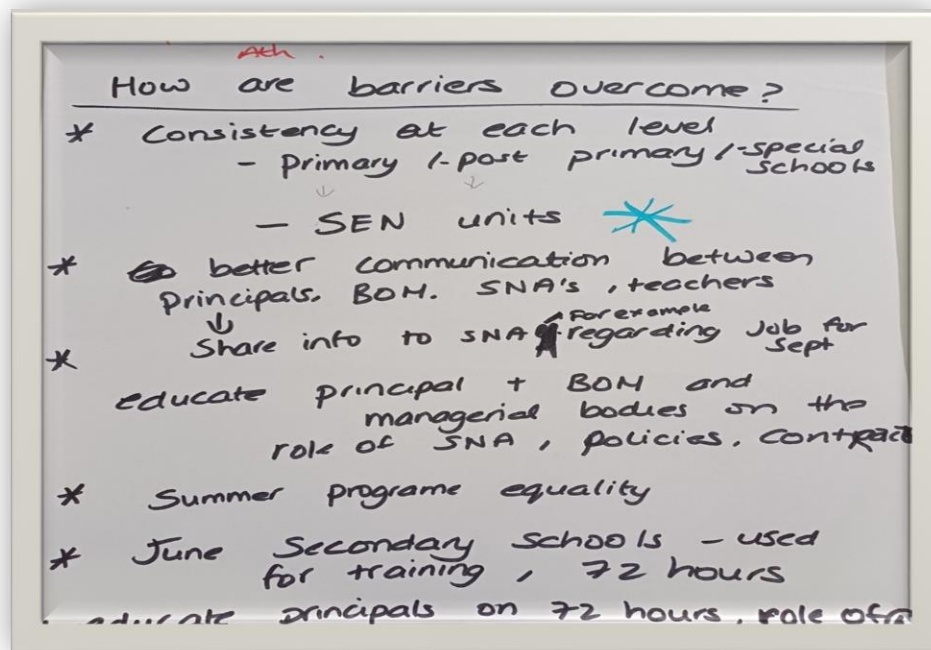


2.9.2 There is significant support for a specific allocation of time for SNA training. The participants suggested this should include time for planning appropriate training with the school including the class teacher/principal and the use of in-service or CPD days for teachers to facilitate simultaneous training for SNAs. They suggested that more time from the 72 hours be allocated for training purposes by schools and that schools would receive direction to this effect from the Department.

2.9.3 It was suggested that schools should cluster for training, learning and development purposes in different regions and that this approach would generate financial savings and other efficiencies. It was also noted that clustering for training would be a good way for SNAs to meet and network with SNAs in other schools. A number of participants commented that the focus groups were the first opportunity they had been given to meet and talk to other SNAs.

2.9.4 The SNAs suggested that they should have some financial incentive for engaging in training. Suggestions included a training allowance, grant funding from the Department and a refund of fees scheme for completing accredited courses.

2.9.5 The other suggested solution is to improve communication between the principal and the SNA including performance reviews and face to face interaction and participation in relevant school meetings. The SNAs also suggest that the SENO should have more interaction with the SNAs in their schools and be available for advice or support when required.



2.9.6 The SNAs felt strongly that access to relevant student information would greatly enhance performance in their role and their understanding of the care needs of the students they support. While some have access to relevant information the level of sharing across schools varies with many SNAs having little or no access. The SNAs advise that it would be advantageous to be included in the multi-disciplinary meetings as they hold a key position in the school team through their caring role with the student and can provide valuable insight into their needs. Their inclusion in such meetings would also ensure consistency of approach to the benefit of the child in question. Both the SNA and the student would benefit from a meeting with parents before the school term begins and outside the confines of the classroom.

2.9.7 A structured learning and development strategy framework similar to the Droichead framework mentioned previously was suggested.

2.9.8 It would be helpful for SNAs to have access to regularly updated lists of accredited and recognised courses from legitimate providers. This would provide consistency in training and learning for each school setting. It is suggested that the training should be available locally so that it is accessible for all. There was also discussion on the need for targeted training for each of the primary, post primary and special schools settings.

“I can catheterise but I cannot sing a phonics song or read a story”

2.9.9 The participants note the need for targeted training in relation to visual impairment, deaf and hard of hearing, autism and in relation to general and specific medical needs. There were examples discussed of schools with strong and effective leadership in the school which deliver training and development initiatives for all staff including the SNAs. The team approach ensures consistent delivery of quality care to relevant children and maximises the potential of the SNAs involved. Some very positive examples were provided where representatives from the student’s medical team in the local hospital visited the school to provide training and advice. Other schools had received training in first aid from local experienced paramedics.

2.9.10 While some have completed very useful, effective courses there are many who indicate they have little or no access to advice or support when dealing with care issues. It is agreed by participants that these learning opportunities should be available to all schools in order to deliver appropriate care to the children involved.

2.9.11 The minimum entry requirement was discussed and the consensus is this should be raised to ensure that entry level SNAs have a basic level of competence and are ready for on the job training. Level 6 award was seen as appropriate but with the course content to include a mandatory work placement to provide practical experience on the demands of the SNA role. The solution should involve recognised courses only and a ‘grandparents’ rule should be put in place to exempt those already in the SNA role who may not have the opportunity or incentive to retrain.

2.9.12 Participants mentioned effective practices in other countries that they have adapted for their schools and suggest that the Department look at these and other best practice models to see what could be used to enhance the SNA role here.

2.9.13 It is suggested that larger schools in particular should have an ‘anchor’ or senior SNA to provide direction and feedback on performance and identify training needs. Many SNAs feel this would provide support which would facilitate greater proficiency and a level of confidence that they are fulfilling their role requirements. It would address poor

performance and provide a route to seek advice where difficulties arise e.g. in relation to role description, the correct approach to delivering care, etc.

2.9.14 There is consensus that there should be an SNA representative on the board of management of each school to provide input from this significant workforce.

2.9.15 It is suggested that there should be a SNA representative working in the Department with experience in and knowledge of the role to assist with developing policy and to act as a direct link between the Department and the SNA workforce.

3. Discussion

3.1 The enthusiasm of the Special Needs Assistants participating in the focus group for further training was notable as was the significant proportion who take a proactive approach to training. Many SNAs advise that, if a child with a particular need is due to start in the school, they carry out their own research into the relevant condition or disability with a view to learning how to address the associated needs. There was enthusiastic discussion about the various training options available and exchange of information on how to access them. While the wholehearted interest of the SNAs in learning and development is a distinct strength there is a sense of a workforce which is not operating to its full potential. Additional supports deployed effectively will yield benefits for all stakeholders, particularly the students in their care.

3.2 The ad hoc nature of the training undertaken, often based on word of mouth or an internet search, carries the risk that inappropriate training will be accessed which is inconsistent with Department policy and/or best practice. It is also a cause for concern that new SNAs may be entering a classroom without sufficient information on either the school or the students in their care.

3.3 From a strategic perspective there is a core requirement for the SNA workforce to have access to a structured Learning and Development Programme which provides appropriate information and opportunities for suitable training, and which communicates best practice. It can also act as a conduit for Department of Education policy initiatives which impact on the work of a SNA and for which they require training as part of a whole of school approach. A Learning and Development Programme will respond to the consensus among SNAs that they are often excluded from training on relevant policy matters while also addressing the consequential gap in the policy implementation process. A Learning and Development Programme should address the needs of both

new and experienced SNAs and cater for various schools settings i.e. primary, post primary and special schools.

3.4 As a first step to addressing the training and information gap, options for provision of an online magazine or information hub for SNAs will be explored. This tool will provide information on leave arrangements, relevant circulars and links to legitimate agencies and courses.

3.5 A formal induction process for newly appointed SNAs combining job shadowing with a mentoring programme and an induction booklet should be explored with stakeholders. A structured approach to induction will fast-track progression to proficiency which is essential given the frontline nature of the SNA role.

3.6 A need for direction on their role and feedback on their performance has been communicated by both new and experienced SNAs. Performance reviews provide input to learning and development through the provision of support to correct performance issues before they become irrevocable and by encouraging growth and development which in turn maintains staff motivation. Whether this is the function of the school principal or, as suggested by the SNAs, a senior SNA, is a matter for further consideration.

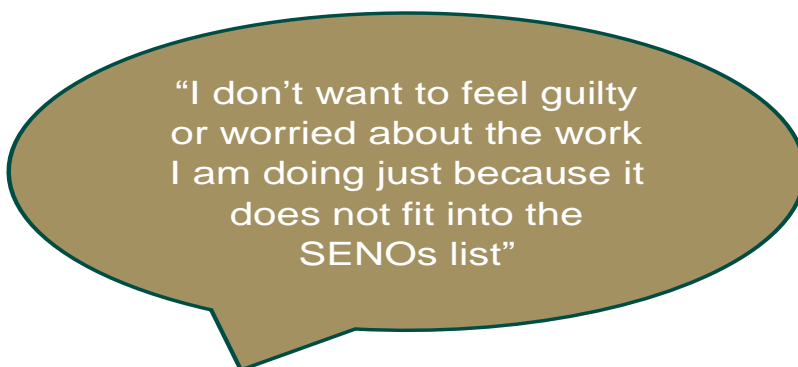
3.7 The tendency for SNAs to look outside the school for training options means they may not access training which best suits the needs of their particular role and may miss an opportunity to engage in more relevant training. As noted above, there is a positive association between strong school leadership and SNAs who feel confident and competent in their role. While some SNAs indicate that the school (by which they generally meant the principal or their representative) is a valued source of information, this is not consistent for all SNAs and varies between schools.

3.8 It is essential to the delivery of appropriate care by SNAs that school leadership actively pursues capacity building measures for SNAs on their team. Engagement between SNAs and school leadership including the SEN team for care planning and review at the start and end of the school term is an important factor to ensure SNAs are adequately trained to deliver appropriate and effective care. Measures to formalise this task should be explored and to ensure it is accurately recorded as required under DE Circular 71/2011. Schools can be supported to provide relevant training through an information hub hosted by the Department of Education which points to available courses and other relevant information.

3.9 The extent to which SNAs personally cover the cost of training undertaken is noteworthy. While many of the courses were delivered at nominal costs others were

more expensive. It is understandable that prospective SNAs would self-finance their training with a view to enhancing their employability. However, it is not appropriate for an employed SNA to have to fund relevant training. The financing of training for SNAs is a topic to explore with school management bodies and other stakeholders with a view to addressing this issue.

3.10 Feedback from SNAs indicates there is an absence of contact with the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) or involvement for the planning, co-ordination and review of education supports to schools that enrol students with special educational needs. This points to a missed opportunity to deliver a better SNA service through care planning and review. It was noted at a number of sessions that schools very often will not ask for assistance from the NCSE or additional SNA supports for the school as they are afraid that they might somehow lose support hours as a result of the stringent reviews carried out by the NCSE. Consultation with the NCSE should take place with a view to developing positive engagement with schools and SNA staff.



3.11 The Diploma in Inclusive School Support (UCD) is a key training support which has been delivered to 12% of SNAs to date at a cost of €1,931,400.00 to the Exchequer.

| Year of course | Places available | Enrolled on course | Completed course | Cost €700 per student |
|---|------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Jan-Dec 2021 | 500 | 500 | 458 | €350,000.00 |
| 2021-22 | 1000 | 941 | 839 | €658,700.00 |
| 2022-23 | 1000 | 961 | 849 | €672,700.00 |
| Cost to develop: Diploma in Inclusive School Support | | | | €250,000.00 |
| Total Spent to date August 2023 | | | | €1,931,400.00 |

The level of positive feedback from participants reflects the relevance of the course content and its contribution to building the competence of the SNA workforce.

3.12 Input from participants through the focus groups, however, indicates there is scope to enhance the course through the inclusion of a practical workshop delivered in regional

locations. This reflects the hands-on nature of the SNA role and the need to ensure the Diploma in Inclusive School Support (UCD) is accessible to as many SNAs as possible.

3.13 The online delivery of the course is attractive in terms of eliminating travel time and reducing the impact on personal life. However, the value of face to face contact with lecturers and with other students must not be underestimated. The lack of peer to peer interaction is marked in the context of the limited contact between SNA colleagues on a day to day basis. These factors inform the view that a blended approach to delivery is optimal.

3.14 It is noted by many post primary SNAs that the content of the programme is targeted towards the primary school setting. A review of course content to assess relevance to the post primary and special school settings is therefore merited.

3.15 Of those SNAs who had not enrolled on the course there was some reluctance which when explored seemed to arise due to concern about the level and type of course content, the supports that would be available, the time invested and lack of confidence in their ability to return to formal study. There is a need for SNAs to be actively encouraged to enrol in the course and to build awareness of the academic supports available. These modifications to the Diploma in Inclusive School Support (UCD) will ensure it appeals to a wider audience and provides a robust foundation for upskilling the SNA workforce.

3.16 There is a high degree of awareness of training courses available to SNAs through ETBs, Institutes of Further Education, Institutes of Technology and private providers. However, there is a cohort who are less aware of short courses delivered free of charge or at nominal cost such as through the Education Centres than those that are more expensive, long term courses. Feedback from SNAs indicates there is demand for courses which address the post primary and special schools settings. There was broad agreement that the SNA role encounters new and complex challenges when working with adolescents. Targeted training for post primary and special schools should therefore be explored with relevant stakeholders with a view to promoting those courses that already exist and developing new courses where necessary.

3.17 Many participants advise that they experience delays in receiving responses to queries on pay and conditions from the Department of Education and indicate a need for an improved response mechanism. During school hours SNAs are not usually free to make or take phone calls which impacts their ability to make contact. Discussion around the benefits of email queries including having a record for future reference pointed to some SNAs not being as comfortable with this means of communication. An information hub with a FAQ document can provide assistance and reduce the number of phone calls.

Engagement with relevant sections of DE should take place with a view to developing a FAQ document and reducing response times.

3.18 Finally the perceived lack of respect for the SNA role, while not directly related to learning and development, is a recurrent discussion point. The SNAs themselves link this to the minimum educational qualifications² for the SNA role which they consider generates an impression of an uneducated and unprofessional workforce. They also point the use of the word “scheme” which they consider indicates SNAs are a transient workforce. They point out that the SNA role is not seen as a career and not on the CAO which impacts negatively on learning and development as SNAs do not see any associated reward or recognition. The case for amending the minimum educational qualifications should therefore be explored with stakeholders. As an essential component of the SEN team the use of the word “scheme” in relation to the SNA workforce should cease.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 The focus groups were arranged to seek the perspective of SNAs on the learning needs of their role, to identify any training gaps which exist and to explore opportunities to enhance their competence in the SNA role. They also provided an opportunity to discuss where SNAs are currently sourcing information related to their role, including information on the terms and conditions of their employment and information on how to meet the needs of the children in their care. The focus groups further explored where SNAs would like to source such information and what format best suits their needs.

4.2 The evidence and insight gathered from the focus groups will inform policy decisions on a learning and development programme for SNAs. It will also facilitate tailored delivery of information relevant to the role in a manner which suits the needs of the SNA.

4.3 The findings set out in this report will be shared with relevant areas within the Department of Education and with relevant agencies and stakeholders with a view to identifying areas for improvement in learning and development and to convey other information relevant to the work of the SNA.

4.4 The following are the recommended actions for the Department arising from the focus groups:

² A level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications, OR. A minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate, OR. an equivalent qualification.

- Develop a structured Learning and Development Programme which addresses the needs of both new and experienced SNAs and caters for various schools settings i.e. primary, post primary and special schools.
- Explore with stakeholders how a formal induction process for newly appointed SNAs may be delivered in order to fast-track progression to proficiency in the SNA role.
- Consider how the need for direction and feedback on performance communicated by both new and experienced SNAs can be addressed.
- Explore with stakeholders how principals and boards of management can support the work of SNAs and address their learning and development needs.
- Explore with the NCSE how greater support for and communication with SNAs may be achieved including through the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)
- Review the content and delivery of the National Training Programme for SNAs with reference to the feedback provided by SNAs on potential enhancements
- Liaise with the ESCI and the ETBI to share feedback from the SNAs with a view to delivering tailored training opportunities for SNAs in their training programmes.
- Develop a user friendly online magazine or ‘Information Hub’ on Gov.ie for SNAs to have access to all information, reference and support material in one area. This is to include information on relevant training courses.
- Liaise with relevant sections in the Department to reduce response times for queries and to develop a FAQ document for inclusion in a SNA information hub.
- Explore with DE colleagues how language in circulars may be simplified and accompanied by examples to communicate meaning.
- Discontinue the use of the word “scheme” in relation to the SNA workforce.
- Discuss with education partners how to achieve access for SNAs to relevant information with a view to providing insight into behaviours, care needs and support strategies for the children in their care.

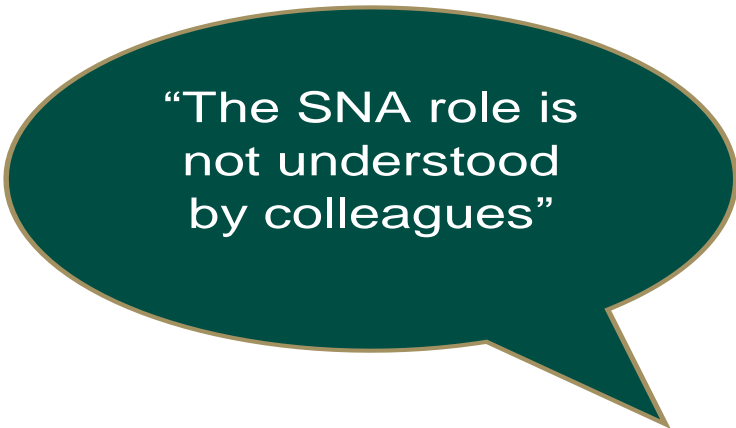
5. Additional Information not related to Learning and Development

5.1 While many SNAs indicate the role can be very rewarding and is a family friendly occupation in terms of the working hours, etc., a number of SNAs feel that they are not seen as key members of the school community and their voice is not heard. They feel their role and their contribution to the student’s successful placement in school is undervalued. They also feel that there is an overall lack of knowledge and understanding of their role in the school and

acknowledgement and appreciation that the teachers would not be able to operate effectively without them in the classroom.

5.2 There is overall agreement that a change in culture is required to increase respect for SNAs and value for the work they do. This would include:

- a change in the language from the descriptor SNA *scheme* as mentioned previously and possibly from the role title of Special Needs Assistant,
- a review of DE Circular 30/2014 which sets out the role and duties of the SNA, 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 most parents and even some professionals are not aware that the SNA is allocated to the school rather than the child.



“The SNA role is not understood by colleagues”

5.3 It was also noted that communication from the Department and agencies to schools is often directed to principal/teachers and does not include other staff such as SNAs even when it is a message for the school community. An example provided was a letter from the Inspectorate regarding anti-bullying research.

5.4 It was noted that all DE strategies are focused on ‘inclusion’ but this does not appear to apply to SNAs.

5.5 Participants advised that moving certain students around with a view to promoting their independence can form a barrier to the effectiveness of the SNA role as it can be disruptive for the student and often there is often no handover or transition process for the students.

5.6 The relationship between the SNA and the class teacher was discussed in terms of its importance to care provision. Some stated that there is resistance from some teachers to the

SNA presence in the classroom when they are teaching. This was reported in relation to the post primary school setting.

5.7 Participants noted the significant challenge that moving between primary and post primary schools presents for students in their care and the fact that SNAs are not involved in communication on this transition does not help.



SNAs in attendance at Learning & Development Focus Group in Cork Education Centre