



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

# The role of Special Needs Assistants: Report on Focus Groups with School Leaders

January - February 2024

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## Definitions

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	<a href="#">Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools</a>
ESCI	Education Support Centres Ireland
ITE	Initial Teacher Training
NCSE	<a href="#">National Council for Special Education</a>
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SNAWDU	Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Unit
The Plan	Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan

## Acknowledgements

SNAWDU would like to thank the school leaders who participated in the focus groups on the role of Special Needs Assistants for their open and constructive engagement and discussion. As principals and deputy principals they have a distinct perspective on the SNA role which provides valuable information for policy development in this area.

SNAWDU also thanks ESCI and the management and staff of the Education Support Centres, in Athlone, Carrick on Shannon, Dublin West, Limerick, Navan and Waterford for the warm welcome extended to our team, the use of their excellent facilities and for their assistance and support to facilitate the focus groups.

Thanks, are also extended to colleagues in other business units of the DE for their assistance with the organisation and delivery of the focus groups.



*Focus Group held in Navan*

# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Background

**1.1.1** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) make a valuable contribution to our school communities, through the provision of adult support to enable students with additional and significant care needs attend school. There are approximately 21,000 SNAs working in our schools at the time of publication of this report.

**1.1.2** In December 2022 the DE established a dedicated SNA Workforce Development Unit within Special Education Division in order to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required.

**1.1.3** The Unit was introduced to 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 additional and significant care needs in our schools.

**1.1.4** In October 2023, the incumbent Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion, Josepha Madigan, T.D., announced the establishment of the first Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan (the Plan). The Plan will reflect a consistent and strategic approach to meeting present and future needs of the SNA workforce. It will encompass an understanding of the SNA role and how they and other stakeholders can best be supported to provide the most effective service to children with additional and significant care needs in our schools.

**1.1.5** The Plan will address the following key areas:

**Pillar 1** – Review and Development of the SNA role.

**Pillar 2** – Establish a Quality Assurance Framework.

**Pillar 3** – Establish a SNA Learning & Development Programme.

**Pillar 4** – Support SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.

**Pillar 5** – Devise a Communications Strategy.

**1.1.6** As part of research and analysis for the Plan the SNAWDU convened focus groups with SNAs, to explore the area of learning and development, in May 2023. The [Special Needs Assistants Learning and Development Focus Group Report](#) was subsequently published on the [Special Needs Assistant \(SNA\) Information Hub](#).

**1.1.7** In February 2024 the SNAWDU launched the first national survey of SNAs. The information collected on foot of the survey will provide additional insight that will contribute to policy decisions in relation to the SNA workforce. A report on the survey has been published on the [SNA Information Hub](#) and is available on the following [link](#).

## **1.2 Purpose of the focus groups**

**1.2.1** The SNA Workforce Development Plan is being developed in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders including SNAs, school management bodies, trade unions, schools, parents/guardians and children. The direct input of school leaders through the focus groups will provide valuable assistance in decision making around policy development and reform in this area. Their responsibility for deploying and managing SNA resources provides school leaders with a unique perspective on the SNA role which is an important factor in determining the strategic approach to be taken.

**1.2.2** The focus groups were convened to seek the views of principals and deputy principals on the role and duties of the SNA, learning and development for SNAs, issues around recruitment, retention and diversity and how best school leaders can communicate with the SNAs as members of a whole school community.

**1.2.3** Importantly, the focus groups provided staff in the SNAWDU with an opportunity to meet school leaders and by listening to their views, build an understanding of how the role of the SNA has evolved and how the SNA workforce can be supported to deliver the best service for the children in its care.

**1.2.4** Taken along with other evidence and insight, including from the SNA focus groups on learning and development and the national survey of SNAs, the input of school leaders will provide key input to policy development and reform in this area.

## 1.3 Methodology

### 1.3.1 LOCATION

1.3.1.1 The DE collaborated with the ESCI to host focus groups at Education Support Centres in six locations across the country during January and February 2024. The locations, chosen with a view to delivering an appropriate geographical spread, were as follows:

- ❖ Dublin West
- ❖ Carrick on Shannon
- ❖ Navan
- ❖ Waterford
- ❖ Limerick
- ❖ Athlone

### 1.3.2 ATTENDEES

1.3.2.1 A total of 250 participants attended the focus groups across the six locations. While the focus groups targeted school principals and deputy principals there were a small number of SETs in attendance, primarily those with a role co-ordinating, planning and reviewing SEN activities in their schools. Participants were from a variety of school settings including primary, post-primary, special schools, Gaelscoileanna and DEIS schools. There was a mixture of representatives from urban and rural schools as well as both single sex and co-educational schools. See Table 1 below.

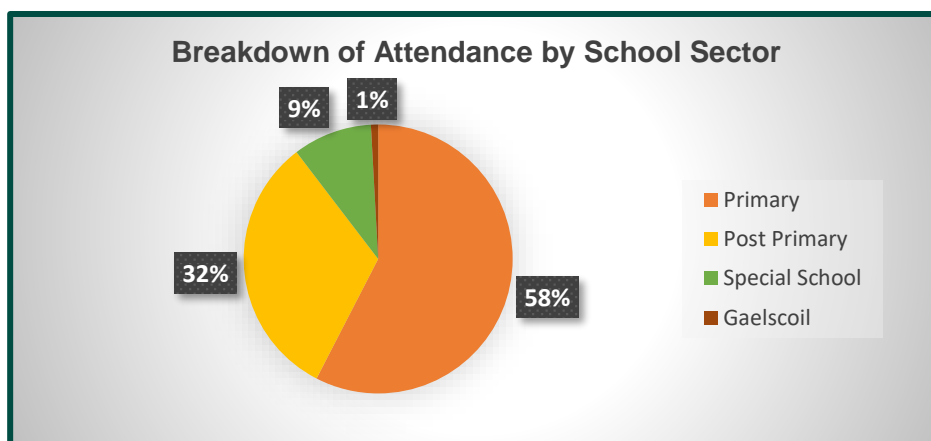
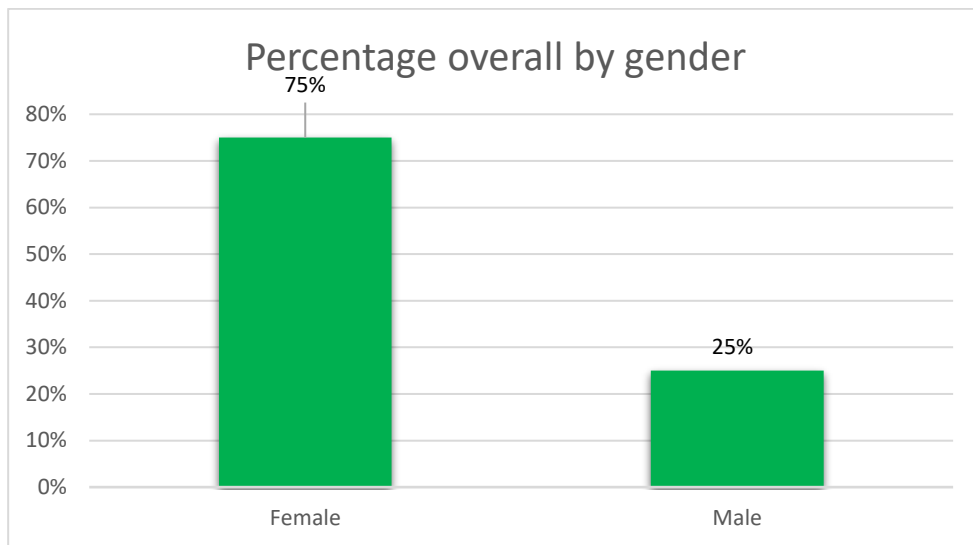
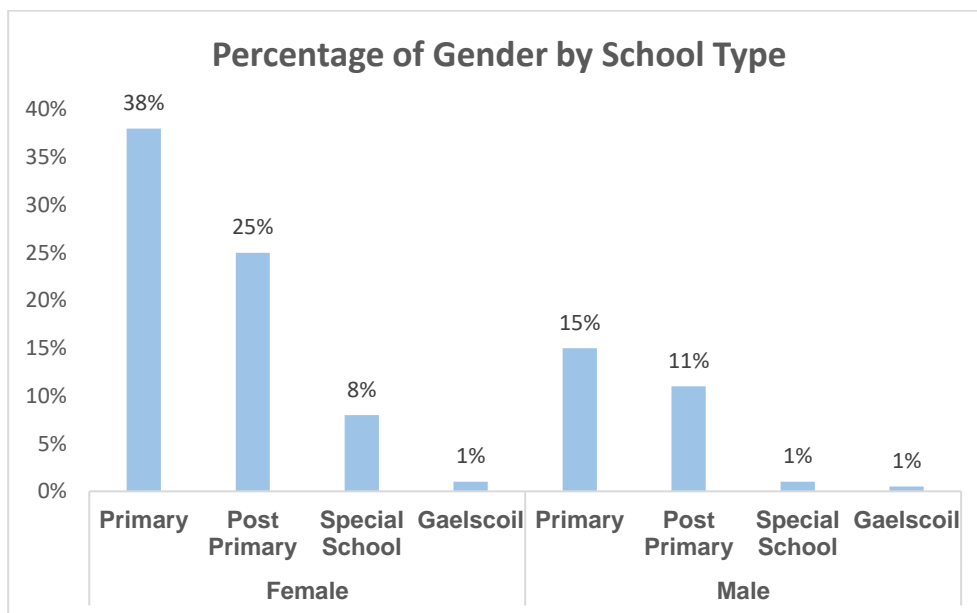


Table 1: Breakdown of Attendance by School Sector





**Table 2: Breakdown of attendance at focus groups by gender**



**Table 3: Breakdown of attendance at focus groups by gender and school type**

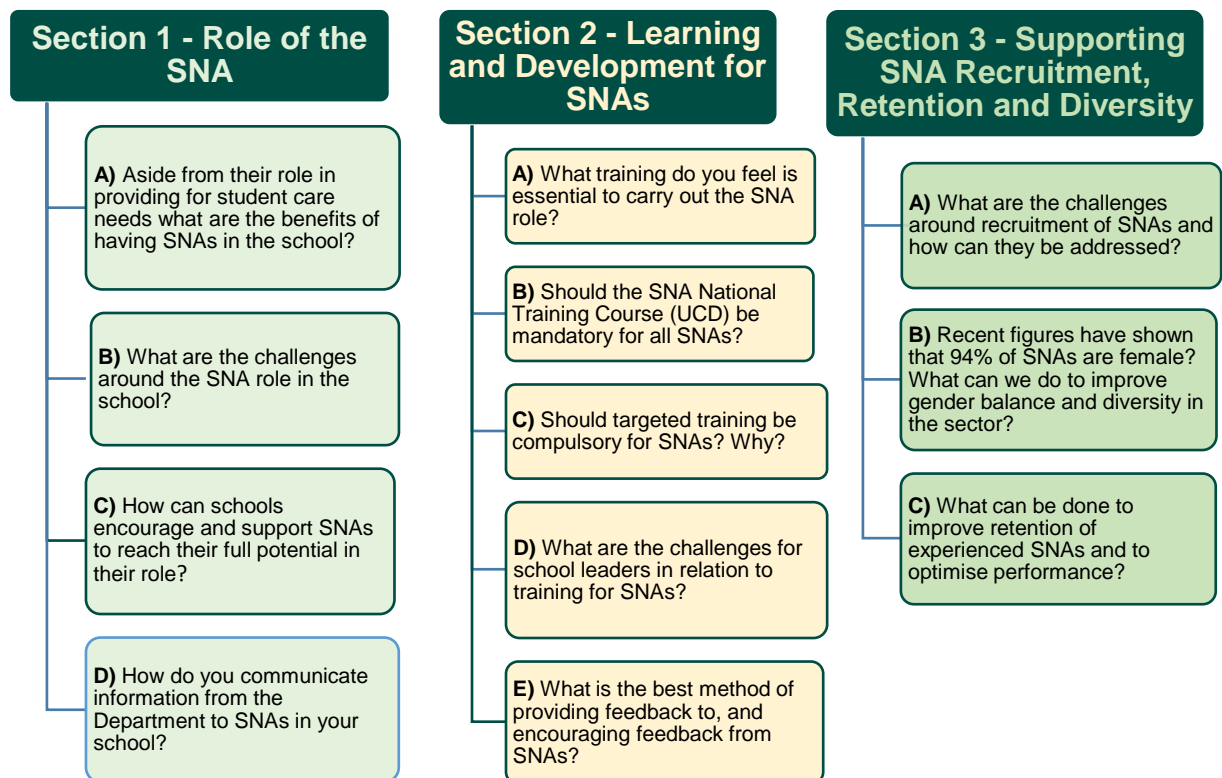
### 1.3.3 ACTIONS

**1.3.3.1** To establish the focus groups the following actions were undertaken:

- ❖ An invitation issued from the DE to all recognised schools to notify principals and deputy principals of the focus groups and how to register to participate.
- ❖ The DE Communications Unit promoted the focus groups on the SNAWDU page on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) and on the DE social media.


- ❖ The education centres were provided with posters to promote the focus groups which included a QR code. They provided an online facility to register for participation. They also issued the agenda to participants on behalf of the DE.
- ❖ To facilitate the widest range of views and responses, it was requested that registration to attend was limited to one representative per school.
- ❖ Substitute cover was facilitated to permit attendance, where required.
- ❖ A morning and afternoon session was scheduled at each location.

### 1.3.4 TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



- ❖ Participants were split into breakout groups for discussion, comprising of four to eight participants per group. The size of these groups varied depending on numbers in attendance at the individual locations.
- ❖ Participants were encouraged to speak freely whilst respecting the view of others.
- ❖ Each focus group agreed to apply the Chatham House Rule to encourage open sharing of views and experiences i.e., 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.

- ❖ A DE official acted as facilitator for each of the breakout groups ensuring that participants stayed on topic and remained within the time limits set for each topic.
- ❖ A participant was nominated within each group to record the data on a flip chart and to share the main points with the wider group.
- ❖ There was a significant overlap of findings across breakout groups and each new point was discussed with the wider group to provide an opportunity for other participants to discuss their views and to assess if there was consensus among the group.
- ❖ The data displayed in chart form in this report reflects overall responses under the different headings and subheadings.



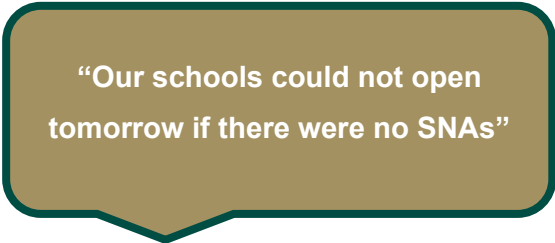
**“SNAs are our eyes and ears in  
the school”**

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## 2. Findings

**2.1** The participants' level of engagement in the focus group was excellent. Participants spoke openly and respectfully within their groups whilst ensuring all in the group were afforded the opportunity to voice their views and opinions.

**2.2** Overall the feedback indicates that the school leaders hold the SNAs in their respective schools in high regard. They acknowledge the important work that SNAs carry out and the important role that they play, not only in the lives of the students that they work with, but also in the school community as a whole.



**“Our schools could not open tomorrow if there were no SNAs”**

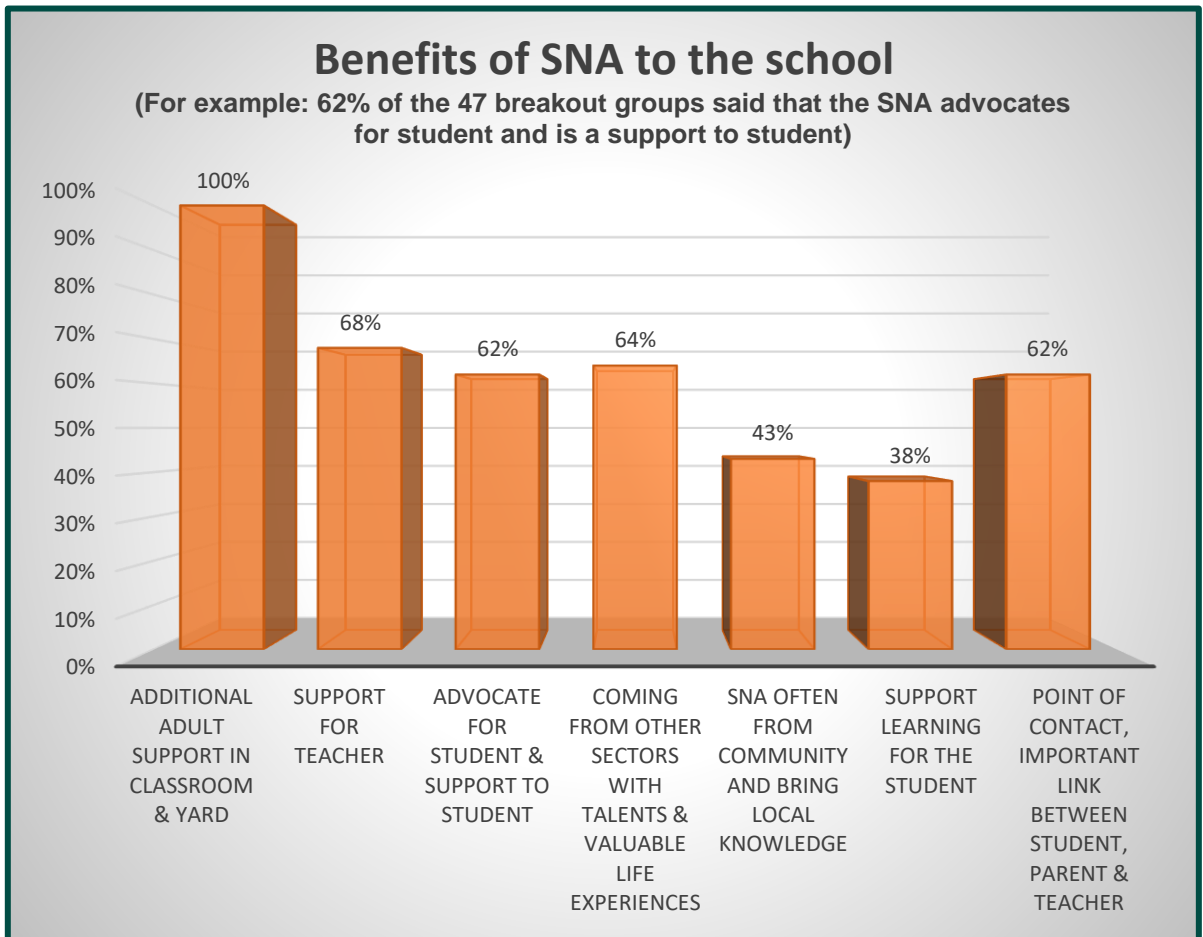
**2.3** It was also clear, however, from discussion that there are varying practices and approaches to the interpretation of the SNA role across schools.

**2.4** Findings throughout this document are presented in percentage charts and text. The following quantitative terms are used when interpreting the percentages of participants communicating shared opinions:

<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Language used</b>
90% or over	The majority
75% - 90%	Most
40% - 74%	Many
25% - 39%	A small number
24% or less	A few / some

### 3. Section 1 - Role of the SNA

#### 3.1 ASIDE FROM THEIR ROLE IN PROVIDING FOR STUDENT CARE NEEDS WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HAVING SNAS IN THE SCHOOL?



**Table 4: Benefits of SNA to the school**

3.1.1 The groups were asked to discuss the benefits of having a SNA in the school aside from their role in supporting the students’ care needs.

**3.1.2** A key positive communicated by the majority of participants was that the SNA is an additional adult who provides an extra ‘set of eyes and ears’ in both the classroom and the yard. Participants advised that the SNA will often note behaviours that the teacher might not see and can quickly intervene to prevent an escalation of behaviours of concern.

**3.1.3** As an additional adult in the classroom the SNA provides support to the teacher and often acts to prevent conflict and accidents.

**3.1.4** It was noted that the SNA facilitates the student’s participation in class. They have a different relationship with the student to the teacher and often students will turn to the SNA if they are struggling to understand.



*Focus Group in Navan*

**3.1.5** There was discussion around the support for learning provided by SNAs with participants outlining how the SNA will prompt a child to take out a particular book, turn to a particular page or help them to focus on the teacher’s direction. This was considered a significant support to the teacher as well as the student and seen as particularly important in DEIS schools where the children in SNA care are in communities at risk of disadvantage

and social exclusion. School leaders advised that in DEIS schools SNAs frequently reinforce learning and therapeutic programmes where these are not being done in the home.

**3.1.6** It was pointed out by many participants, that SNAs can make a real difference in a child's life and often acts as an advocate for the student. Participants reported that SNAs are a consistent support for children in the school and many advised that the SNA can also have a bond with the parent through their linked caring roles. This can be very useful in terms of facilitating ongoing informal communication and feedback on the student in school related matters.

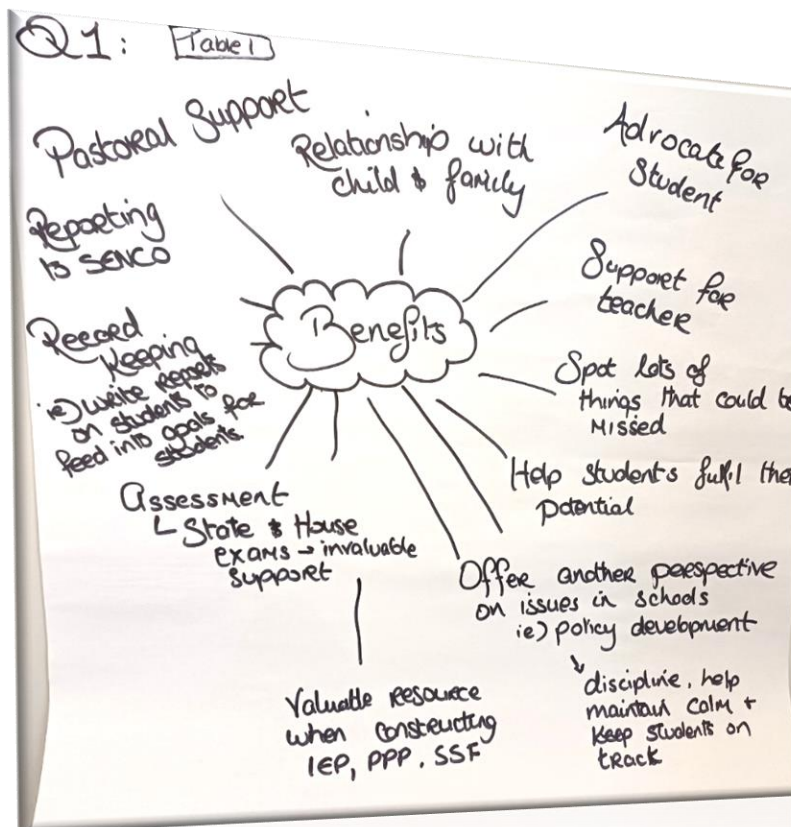
**3.1.7** In many instances the SNA is from the local community and brings insight which would not otherwise be available. They may have a less formal relationship than teachers have with parents, and they may have the opportunity to have more contact with parents outside of school. This liaison role between home and school can help the SNA to better understand the student in their care and can act as a source of information on issues that might affect the student's mood, performance and health on a particular day which is extremely useful information for the SNA and the teacher and in turn for the benefit of the student.

**3.1.8** The school leaders participating in the focus groups valued the SNAs role in record keeping, including helping to construct and update Student Support Plans, and engaging in regular two-way feedback to parents such as through a communication journal.

**3.1.9** School leaders in a number of groups outlined how SNAs often come to the role from many other working backgrounds including childcare and nursing, bringing valuable experience and skills to their new SNA role. Similarly, parents returning to the workforce as a SNA can bring valuable life skills and experience.

**3.1.10** Examples were also provided of SNAs joining the workforce who possess transferable skills from childcare, corporate, catering, gardening and arts and crafts sectors. It was agreed that these skills can introduce the children to different learning experiences. These experiences enrich the culture in the school setting, often involving other students and staff members and enhance the SNA role in the school community.

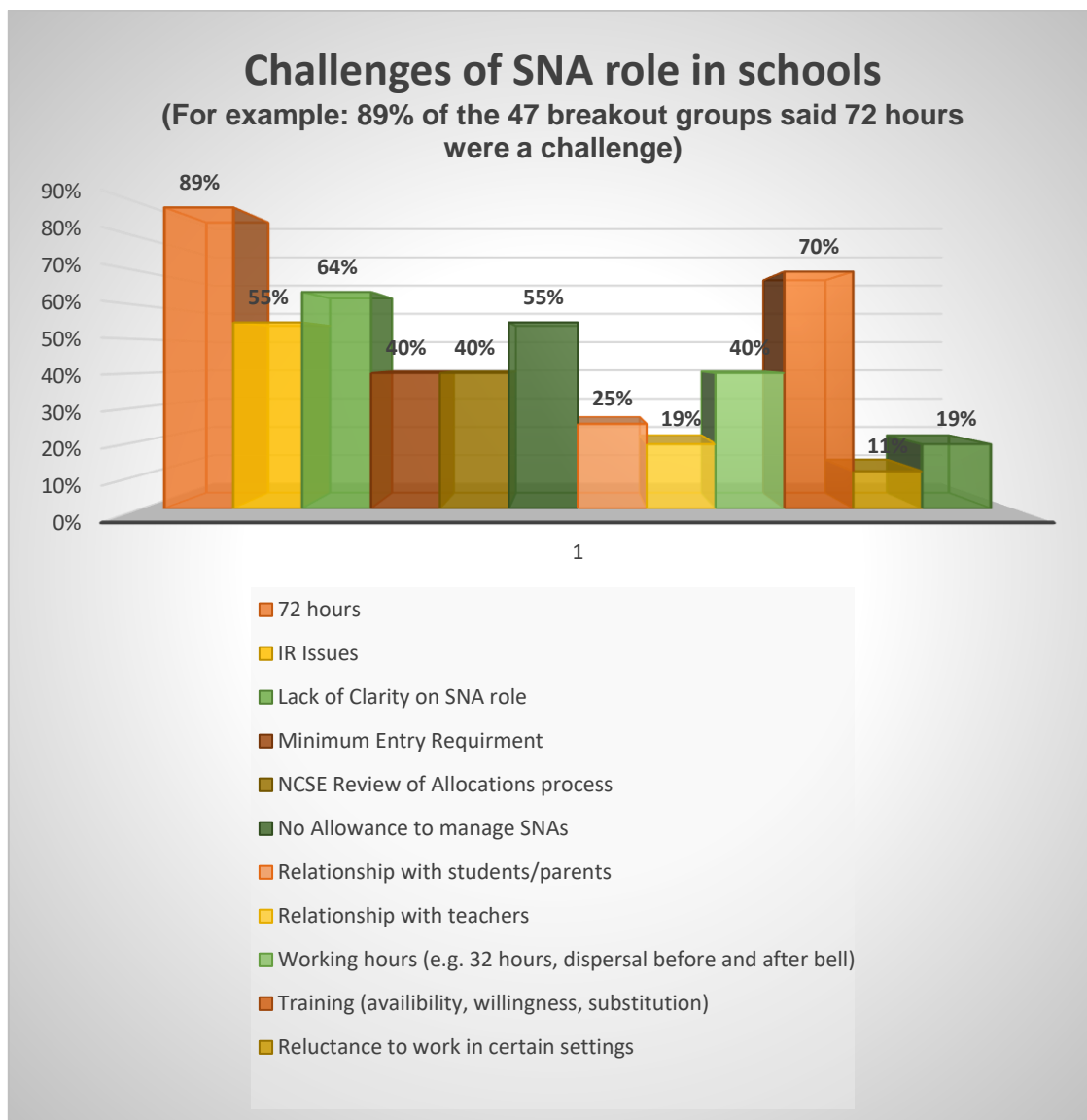
**3.1.11** It was noted by some participants' that children are now reaching puberty earlier and that they have increased anxiety and emotional needs and that the SNA presence in the class is invaluable to provide support during the school day.



**Benefits of SNA to the school: response from one breakout group**



### 3.2 WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AROUND THE SNA ROLE IN THE SCHOOL?



**Table 5: Leading responses on challenges of the SNA role in schools**

**3.2.1** Participants acknowledged that while there are huge benefits to the SNA role there are also many challenges. It was noted that [Circular 30/2014](#) (*The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme to support teachers in meeting the care needs of some children with special educational needs arising from a disability*), presents its own challenges. This circular is perceived as vague and outdated and participants felt that it does not take account of how the role has evolved over the years.

**3.2.2** It was pointed out that the reality of the SNA role in the school is very different from the narrow definition of the role in the circular: the complexity and demands of the role have increased dramatically. It was also cited that the complexities of the SNA role in special school settings are not reflected in the circular and more broadly across DE policies.

**3.2.3** Some participants indicated there are particular issues for hospital schools as they feel there is no pathway for such schools to apply for additional SNA allocations. However, it is important to note that hospital schools can apply to DE for additional SNA allocations where they consider they are merited.

**3.2.4** Most participants agreed that the informal relationship between the SNA and parents for all its benefits can sometimes become a challenge. This arises when the SNA acting out of a desire to help can become over-familiar with the student and their family. This can result in inappropriate communication such as sharing sensitive information at the school gate or discussions on learning progress which are outside the SNA's remit. It was acknowledged that this can be difficult for the SNA where the interaction is prompted by a parent.

**3.2.5** A few school leaders remarked that while generally the class teacher and the SNA work very well together the relationship can occasionally be challenging, particularly in instances where a new teacher is newly assigned to a classroom with a SNA who is familiar with the class and students. Participants considered there is a need for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to include training on how to work effectively with other adults in the classroom. Training for SNAs on how to work with teachers is also considered necessary.

**3.2.6** A few principals from smaller schools advised that there can be issues around isolation for SNAs where they are the only SNA in the school. The absence of a SNA colleague from which to take the lead and with whom they can discuss their approach to the role is challenging particularly where they are newly appointed. There was discussion on how this could be addressed and the potential for SNAs to meet for training events where peer to peer support would be available was proposed.



**“72 hours is not a target”**

**3.2.7** Most participants experienced challenges around implementing the 72 hours and June working. [Circular 0071/2011](#) (*Public Service (Croke Park) Agreement – Special Needs Assistants*), which sets out DE policy in relation to the 72 hours, was deemed very unclear and requiring detailed clarification for both school management and the SNA. A few school leaders indicated they do not apply the requirement for 72 hours or for June working as it would generate ill-will and provoke industrial unrest. The probation process for SNAs was discussed and it was agreed that this should be addressed in the SNA contract review as schools and boards of management did not always understand how to use this mechanism effectively to assess performance.

**3.2.8** There was discussion around communications to SNAs from their trade union and the view was expressed they are sometimes inconsistent with DE circulars. This is perceived as a source of tension between school management and the SNA.

**3.2.9** The NCSE's Exceptional Review process for SNA allocations is seen as challenging by school leaders with participants indicating that the review process and associated paperwork is frustrating and time consuming. Many reported that exceptional reviews appear to mainly result in a decrease in allocations. The perception is that the risk of losing resources inhibits schools from initiating the review process even when they have identified a genuine need for additional SNA resources. However, statistics from the NCSE show that there were five cases since 2022 that indicated a surplus in SNA Allocation and in 3 of these there was a level of reduction. The NCSE have also streamlined the process, now referred to as the SNA Review Process, to reduce the administration burden for schools. It is also notable that the number of SNAs has increased (rather than reduced) annually over successive years and currently numbers approximately 21,000.

**“There is nothing ‘exceptional’  
about a child’s needs”**

**3.2.10** Participants discussed challenges with working hours for SNAs and the inconsistency and confusion that exists around them. Custom and practice had developed in most schools around working hours, but issues have arisen due to lack of clarity in policy on these issues. This can be especially challenging where a newly appointed SNA has previously worked in a school with different arrangements.

**3.2.11** Such issues included the challenge of recruiting for 0.33 of a post, along with confusion over the 32 hours being a pay divisor rather than representing a full-time post. Participants also voiced challenges regarding the requirement for attendance by SNAs before and after school for preparation and dispersal. Some participants reported that SNAs would not co-operate with direction in relation to these periods and consequently do not fulfil this duty.

**3.2.12** Some school leaders mentioned that the complexity of the curriculum at post-primary level 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. This can present a challenge for some SNAs which may in turn make it difficult for them to provide the required level of support for the students in their care. This can lead to a reluctance by some SNAs to engage fully with changes at school level brought about by changes in department curricular policy and/or technology. Sometimes these concerns relating to complexities of need manifest if SNAs are required to work in a newly opened special class, having previously worked in a mainstream setting. In some cases, this can progress to resistance to engaging in required training.

**3.2.13** The physical demands of the SNA role were indicated as a concern by some school leaders. It was put forward by many that the demands of this physically active role should be considered in policymaking decisions.

**3.2.14** Some participants reported a reluctance among some staff in mainstream classes and schools to rotate to or take up a role in a special class. There can also be a reluctance to take up a post in post-primary settings. On discussion it was agreed that this may be due to lack of confidence and insufficient training including on the practical aspects of working with older children and children with autism and other care needs including medical needs.



*Focus group held in Carrick on Shannon*

**3.2.15** Some principals had concerns around who would sign off on medical training for SNAs and/or indemnify the board in relation to peg feeding, administering oxygen etc. <sup>1</sup>

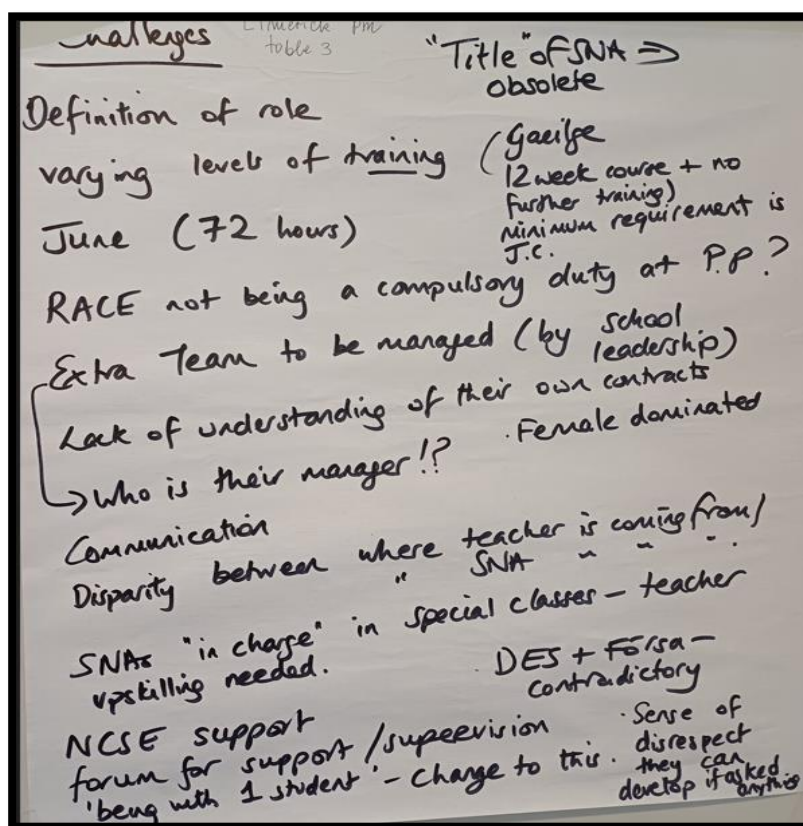
**3.2.16** The challenges which can arise when SNAs take on the additional role of bus escort were outlined including how this can impinge on the effectiveness of their SNA role in the school. In some instances, they are consequently not available for reception and dispersal of children as required in their SNA role. However, it was acknowledged that the challenge of filling a bus escort vacancy often means there is no alternative to appointing the SNA to both roles.

**3.2.17** Participants reported that many SNAs perform duties beyond their role as set out in Circular 30/2014 through goodwill. However, a perceived lack of clarity around the SNA role and duties and in particular the 72 hours, and June hours in post primary schools was considered to have reduced that goodwill over time.

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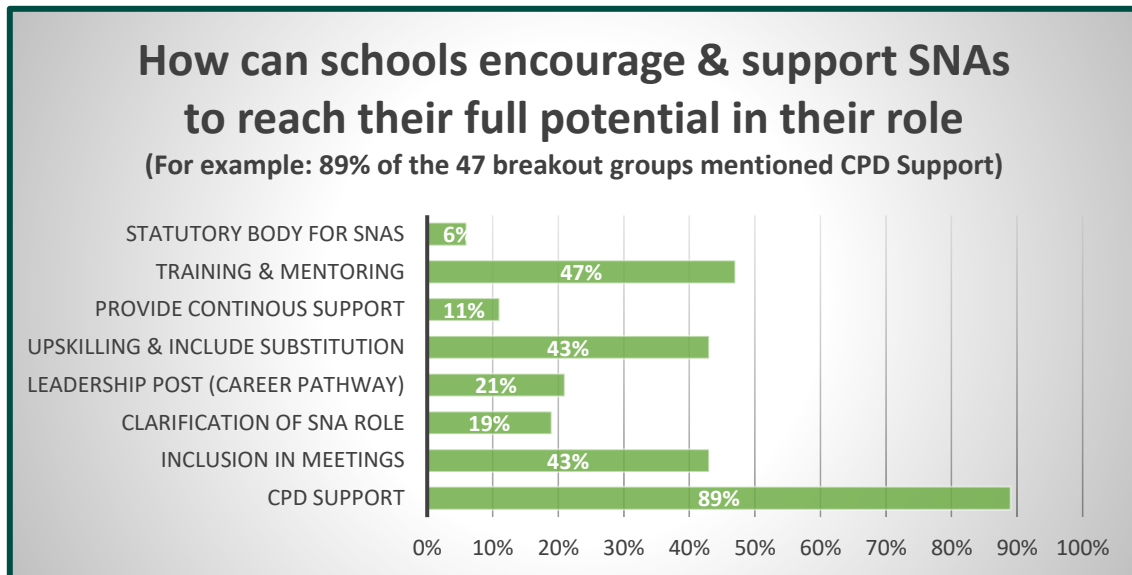
<sup>1</sup> It is a matter for the Board of Management to ensure that SNAs are in a position to effectively meet the care needs of pupils for whom SNA support has been allocated in the school, when appointing an SNA. Where specific training is required, the Board of Management should liaise with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in order to ensure that the HSE provides guidance and training that enables the SNA to meet the care needs of the pupil in an appropriate manner. It is a matter for individual school authorities to make such arrangements locally.

**3.2.18** Some groups remarked that there is no additional remuneration to manage non-teaching staff, including SNAs, who in some cases represented large numbers of their staff. This was seen as a particularly significant issue in special school settings where SNA numbers can far surpass teacher numbers. The addition from September 2024 of an administrative deputy principal role in special schools to work alongside the administrative principal will alleviate the administrative burden.



The challenges of the SNA role in schools: responses from one breakout group

### 3.3 HOW CAN SCHOOLS ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT SNAS TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL IN THEIR ROLE?



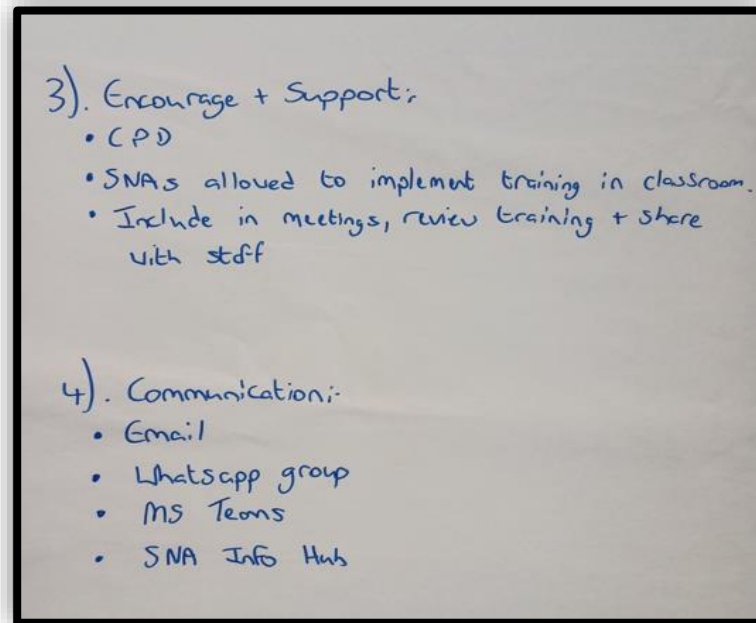
**Table 6: Leading responses on how schools can encourage and support SNAs to reach their full potential**

**3.3.1** Participants in the focus groups strongly agreed a programme of CPD (89%) is required to support SNAs to reach their full potential. Most felt it would give SNAs confidence in their role and provide them with the opportunity to upskill. In order to allow the school to accommodate this, necessary CPD arrangements should be put in place to allow for substitution and/or for SNAs to avail of training on in-service days for schools.

**3.3.2** There was recurrent reference to the benefits of mentoring for newly appointed SNAs and provision of ongoing support mechanisms within the school for all SNAs which would build their competence and understanding of their role in the school community.

**3.3.3** Many school leaders felt that SNAs should be included in meetings and school planning with some participants suggesting that SNAs would not need to attend for the entirety of the meeting, rather they would attend for items on agenda that pertained to their role or the school community as a whole. One principal from a special school reported that they engage in three sets of regular meetings: with SNAs as a group, with teachers as a group and with both SNAs and teachers together. This investment of time while demanding was considered to be overall beneficial in terms of facilitating two-way communication and averting IR and other issues.

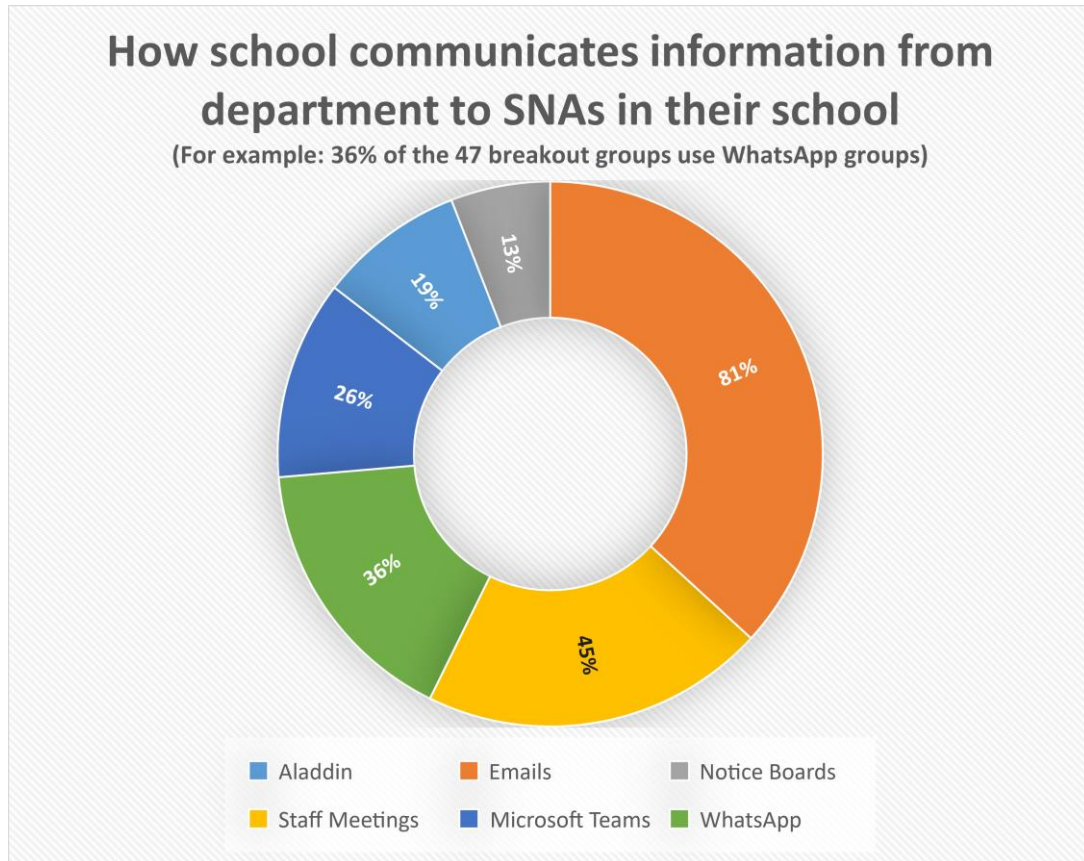
**3.3.4** There was support among some participants for a leadership post for SNAs which would provide a career pathway for them, thereby increasing motivation. Some school leaders indicated support for a statutory body for SNAs which would act as a regulator for the SNA Workforce to ensure a minimum standard of competence, and to identify and manage suitable CPD among other functions.



***How can schools encourage and support SNAs to reach their full potential: response from one breakout group***



### 3.4 HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE INFORMATION FROM THE DEPARTMENT TO SNAs IN YOUR SCHOOL?

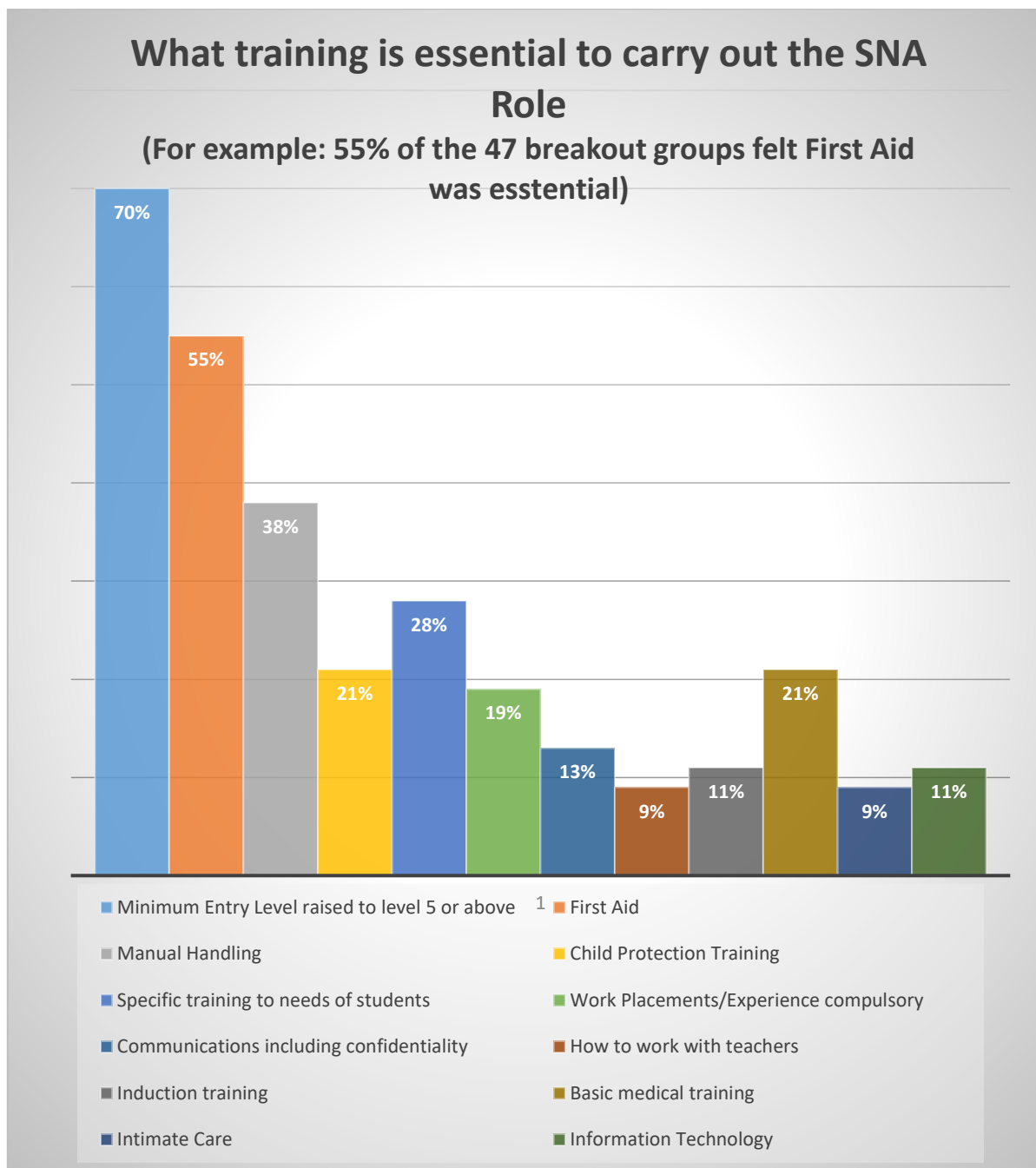


**Table 7: Leading responses on how school communicates information from the department to SNAs in their school.**

**3.4.1** Various methods of communicating information from the DE to SNAs were outlined by school leaders, with emails being the most popular, followed by staff meetings and WhatsApp group messages and MS Teams. Some schools also used Aladdin and staff or SNA notice boards to communicate regularly with SNAs.

## 4. Section 2 - Learning & Development for SNAs

### 4.1 WHAT TRAINING DO YOU FEEL IS ESSENTIAL TO CARRY OUT THE SNA ROLE?



**Table 8: Leading responses on what training is essential to carry out the SNA role**

**4.1.1** Many participants agreed that the current minimum required standard of education<sup>2</sup> for SNAs is inadequate and indicated support for raising the minimum entry requirement to a QQI Level 5 or level 6 in SNA related training. In their view this training should include:

- ❖ Understanding of primary care needs and secondary care needs
- ❖ First Aid
- ❖ Manual Handling
- ❖ Child Protection
- ❖ Health & Safety
- ❖ MAPA (Management of Actual or Potential Aggression)
- ❖ CPI (Crisis Prevention Intervention)
- ❖ Autism
- ❖ Challenging Behaviours
- ❖ Basic medical training for example on use of epi pens
- ❖ Toileting
- ❖ Work Experience as part of the course

**4.1.2** Discussion took place around the many courses currently available, and timelines involved, with courses ranging from 5 days to 6 months. With many of these courses not including work experience, school leaders reported that some newly appointed SNAs are inadequately prepared for the demands of the role.

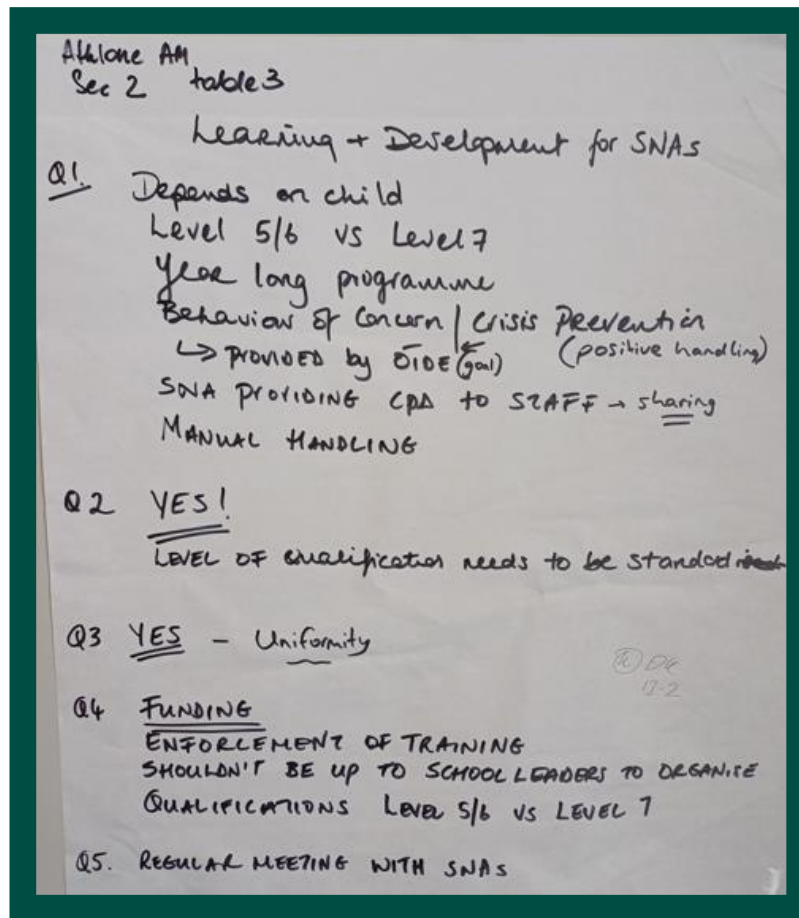


**“We can also learn from the SNAs”**

**4.1.3** Some school leaders reported that newly appointed SNAs whose expectations of the role based on the SNA course they had completed was at odds with the demands of the role. This has negative consequences for the SNA, the principal and most importantly the children in their care. Many participants felt that SNA courses need to be standardised.

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<sup>2</sup> A level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications, OR A minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate, or Equivalent



What training is essential to carry out the SNA role: response from a breakout group

#### 4.2 SHOULD THE SNA NATIONAL TRAINING COURSE BE MANDATORY FOR ALL SNAS?



**Table 9: Responses across all focus groups on National Training Programme**

**4.2.1** The 2018 Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) includes a recommendation for the provision of a national online training programme for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of relevant training. Arising from this recommendation the DE awarded a four-year contract to University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education to design and pilot over a four year period, a new [national online training programme for SNAs](#). The programme is fully funded by the department and delivered at no cost to SNAs employed in recognised schools. To date approximately 2,200 SNAs have completed the national online training programme.

“If you want to be recognised as a professional then you need to be sufficiently qualified”

**4.2.2** The DE is currently evaluating this pilot initiative in conjunction with its work under the SNA Workforce Development Plan to consider how it fits with the long-term learning and development needs for the SNA workforce.

**4.2.3** In order to prompt discussion, participants were asked if the national training programme for SNAs should be mandatory. The majority of participants were aware of the national training programme. The majority agreed that the programme should be mandatory provided it was regularly reviewed and encompassed a practical element to be available at regional locations. Some participants expressed the view that there should be financial incentives for participation.

**4.2.4** It was generally agreed that making the course mandatory for those SNAs without a relevant qualification at a similar level would be a positive step. Some principals noted that those who complete the course are not always those most in need of the training.

**4.2.5** There was discussion around timelines for the SNA Diploma course including when it would need to be completed if it was made mandatory and what portion of the [72 hours](#) should be allocated to studying for and/or completing the course. It was noted that completing the course in a single academic year may not always be feasible as many SNAs have family/caring commitments in the home in addition to their job as a SNA.

### **4.3 SHOULD TARGETED TRAINING BE COMPULSORY FOR SNAS? WHY?**

**4.3.1** Most (83%) of participants agreed that targeted training appropriate to the needs of the school should be compulsory for SNAs. It was indicated that such training should be DE led and funded as the participants felt that the management and cost of this training can put a strain on workloads and budgets in the school.

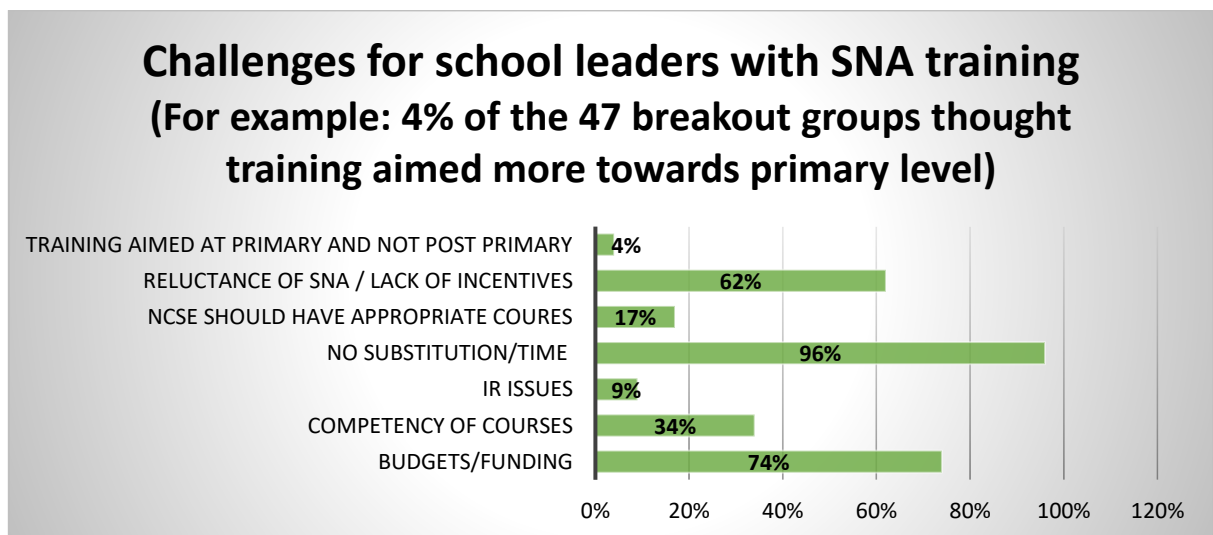
**4.3.2** Concerns around budgets are even greater in the special school setting where there are higher number of SNAs and a greater need for targeted training such as training on administering medicines and on catheterisation.

**4.3.3** It was noted that a lot of schools don't have access to nurses and the movement towards inclusion coincides with increased incidence of medical and therapeutic needs in

schools. The resultant evolution of the SNA role is not reflected in a corresponding increase in support and training.

**4.3.4** Participants felt that incentives such as a career path are necessary to encourage SNAs to complete training courses. A suggestion was also made that SNAs, having completed targeted training, could deliver training to other staff in the school. It was felt that training would build confidence and empower SNA staff in the school which would in turn benefit all staff and students.

#### 4.4 WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS IN RELATION TO TRAINING FOR SNAS?



**Table 10: Leading responses on the challenges for school leaders in relation to training for SNAs**

**4.4.1** Participants shared challenges faced by the school in relation to training for SNAs including budgets, lack of substitution to release an SNA to attend training, lack of incentives for training generating a reluctance by some SNAs to complete training.

**4.4.2** School leaders advised that finding time to arrange training was difficult. The view was also expressed that sourcing training is difficult and it was suggested that a central body or unit with responsibility to obtain information on training would assist school management and save them time.

**4.4.3** It was mentioned that some training is only available outside of school hours which impinges on SNA work life balance, with no incentive to engage as at present training is not recognised by the DE and it does not contribute to career progression.

**4.4.4** Concern was expressed that a lot of available training is aimed at primary level rather than post-primary. Participants also questioned whether the NCSE should offer appropriate training to SNAs.

**4.4.5** Some school leaders indicated that online training such as webinars are not always an effective solution to meeting training needs as the participant can take a passive approach to such courses. However, others suggested that pre-recorded training courses would save time and resources for schools and could be deployed during in-service days.

**4.4.6** It was suggested that schools and the DE should align training programmes in Education Support Centres nationwide with a view to providing appropriate training and a forum for SNAs to meet.

**4.4.7** School leaders suggested that training SNAs in school clusters might be a viable and cost-effective method of providing regular necessary and targeted training for SNAs. This could potentially be done on in-service days if schools in an area were able to align calendars. This would also overcome issues for small schools where SNAs can be reluctant to complete training alone, as it would provide direct peer interaction, learning and support.

**4.4.8** School Leaders mentioned that there is a need for support for the mental wellbeing of SNAs. In particular those SNAs that frequently deal with difficult situations including managing behaviours of concern and SNAs who have a close relationship with students who are experiencing significant events in their lives. Examples were given of children dealing with trauma in the home and children with complex medical needs who pass away at a young age.

**4.4.9** It was also noted that the teachers are not trained to work with SNAs, and it was felt that this was a deficit in teacher training that should be addressed by Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Similarly, SNA training should address the relationship with the teacher in the classroom.



## **4.5 WHAT IS THE BEST METHOD OF PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO, AND ENCOURAGING FEEDBACK FROM SNAS?**

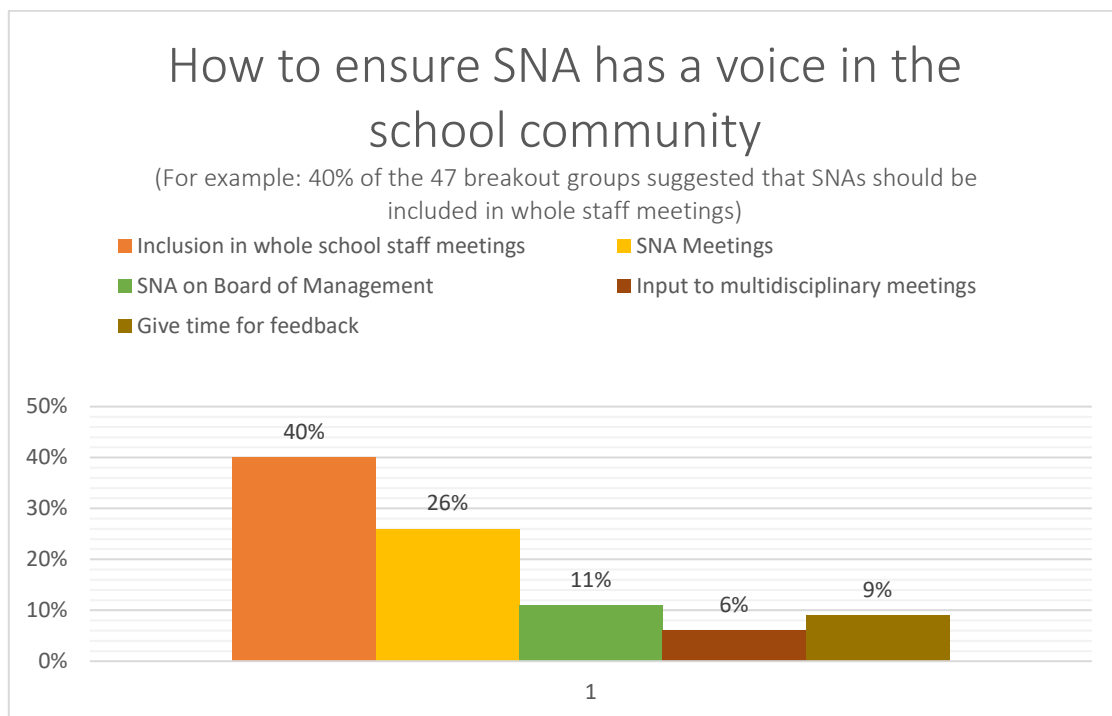
**4.5.1** Participants discussed the best methods of providing and receiving feedback from SNAs and the general consensus was that face-to-face meetings were the most effective method, including:

- ❖ One to one, team or informal meetings.
- ❖ Probation reviews or monthly feedback sessions.
- ❖ Exit interviews.

**4.5.2** Surveys of staff to elicit feedback and a mentoring programme were also suggested as effective ways to receive feedback from SNAs. School leaders from larger schools suggested a regular newsletter for the school community would be appropriate.

**4.5.3** Some principals mentioned that they foster an 'open-door' culture with staff in the school to encourage feedback and that this works well for them.

## 4.6 HOW DO YOU ENSURE THE SNA HAS A VOICE IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY?



**Table 11: Leading responses on how to ensure SNA has a voice in the school community.**

**4.6.1** Participants indicated that inclusion in whole school staff meetings would ensure the SNA has a voice in the school. It was apparent that there are good practices in many schools in this regard, with some participants indicating this practice is already in place in their school.

**4.6.2** Other examples cited, included schools running regular fun events such as ‘Fab Friday’ where all of the staff in the school community took part in shared activities such as baking and other fun events. Many school leaders also reported that the SNAs are included in all staff social gatherings and outings which helped to foster team spirit in the school community.

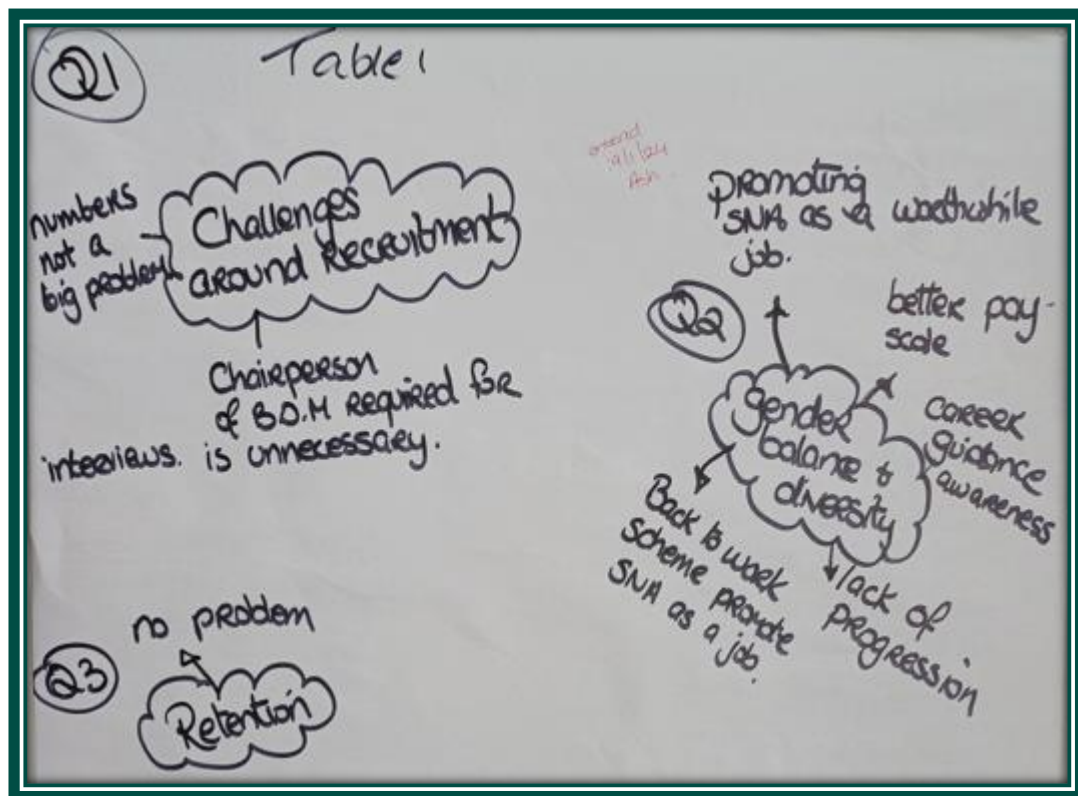
**“SNAs can provide constructive positive input to planning for students”**

**4.6.3** It was also mentioned that it would be more effective if SNAs as a group held their own meetings to discuss issues and reported to school leaders on agreed items. However, it was acknowledged that this may not be practical in smaller school settings that have less SNAs so it was suggested that SNAs from various schools and different school settings could meet as a group. This would also give the SNA an opportunity to network with other SNAs and learn about working in different settings.

**4.6.4** Some participants felt that SNAs should be considered for the staff member nomination for the Board of Management as currently it is only open to teachers. There was discussion on how this would work in the special school setting where the number of SNAs exceeds that of teachers.

## 5. Section 3 - Recruitment, Retention & Diversity

### 5.1 WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AROUND RECRUITMENT OF SNAS AND HOW CAN THEY BE ADDRESSED?



*The challenges around recruitment of SNAs and how can they be addressed: response from a breakout group.*

**5.1.1** In relation to recruitment of SNAs participants agreed that generally there is no difficulty around the number of applications for SNA posts, but the quality of applicants can be problematic. Lack of practical experience and inconsistent standards of training among providers, particularly those delivering exclusively online, was seen as a significant factor. Insufficient knowledge and understanding of critically important topics such as child protection were noted as a particular concern.

**5.1.2** The administrative burden attached to conducting recruitment campaigns was discussed but school leaders considered it was important to select the right person for the school so were not generally in favour of centralised recruitment.

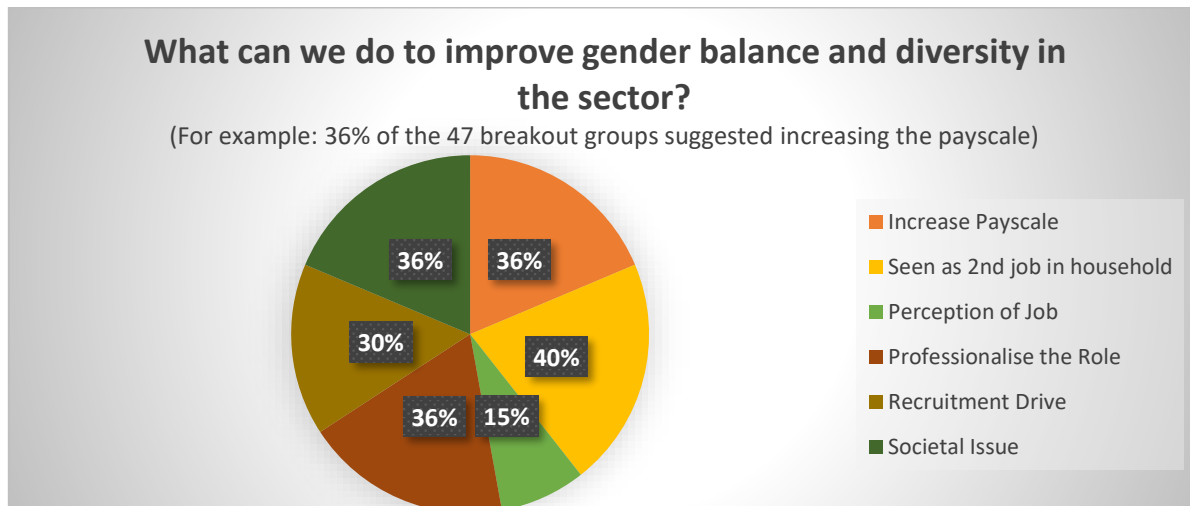
**5.1.3** There was consensus that the minimum educational requirement for SNAs needs to be raised and that there is a need to ensure that there is a consistent standard of learning and training available through appropriate, accredited courses which fully prepare participants for the demands of the SNA role.

**5.1.4** Participants agreed that Garda vetting for applicants is a challenge, and this should be centralised. Participants found the process time consuming and particularly difficult when recruiting substitute SNAs required at short notice.

**5.1.5** Recruitment for posts with reduced hours such as 0.33 of a post was a challenge for many principals. Confusion on how the supplementary SNA panel operates was reported.

**5.1.6** School leaders also outlined that the contract arrangements for SNAs presents a difficulty as there is a lack of job security even for those who have many years' service. This means some newly recruited, highly qualified SNAs have difficulty getting a mortgage.

## 5.2 RECENT FIGURES HAVE SHOWN THAT 94% OF SNAS ARE FEMALE? WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE GENDER BALANCE AND DIVERSITY IN THE SECTOR?



**Table 12: Leading responses on how to improve gender balance and diversity in the sector**

**5.2.1** In relation to gender balance the majority of participants believed that the SNA role is seen as a mothering role (40%), especially suitable for mothers returning to work after a period working in the home caring for their own young children. They feel that the SNA role is not seen as a breadwinner role or a career option but as a second job in a household. The lack of career path was seen as a factor contributing to this perception.

**5.2.2** Care needs have traditionally been associated with women and the SNA role needs to be promoted as a career option for men. This will help to address the gender imbalance and provide strong role models for the children in SNA care. A suggestion was made to target recruitment in careers where men tend to retire earlier such as those in sports careers, the army, the gardai and the prison service.

**5.2.3** Suggested solutions to improve diversity among the SNA workforce included increases in pay and professionalising the role to make it more attractive. It was also suggested that the career be promoted in career guidance for schools as part of a national promotional campaign. It was also proposed that migrant workers would be suitable for the SNA role and particularly valuable to support migrant children. Examples were given where Ukrainian SNAs work in a school with Ukrainian children mitigating the impact of their

trauma through the sound of a familiar accent and an understanding of their experience and perspective which in turn is communicated to the teacher and wider school community.

**5.2.4** Some special school leaders advised that, while they welcome diversity in their staffing, there can sometimes be a communication barrier between children with more complex SEN and staff members who do not have English as a first language.

### **5.3 WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE RETENTION OF EXPERIENCED SNAS AND TO OPTIMISE PERFORMANCE?**

**5.3.1** The majority of participants feel retention in the SNA workforce is not a significant issue. However, it was noted that the lack of a dedicated training and development programme and lack of substitution could increase turnover particularly for more experienced SNAs. Participants noted that there is no incentive to upskill and that improvements in pay and the pay scale for SNAs might improve this.

**5.3.2** It was stated that uncertainty around SNA hours can create retention difficulties. The fixed term contracts and uncertainty around the longevity of the position were listed as related issues.

**5.3.3** It was again mentioned that the role needs to be professionalised and promoted as a career. It was suggested that the DE could visit schools to promote the role.

**5.3.4** It was discussed among participants that SNAs should be rotated regularly. It was noted that rotating SNAs from special classes into mainstream classes would increase experience and knowledge and SNA burnout could be avoided.

**5.3.5** Some participants noted that as an aging workforce some SNAs may not be physically able for the demands of the role, particularly when working with children with complex medical and special educational needs. Swimming, PE and manual handling were also cited as a challenge, impacting on retention. It was suggested that rotation of SNAs might alleviate this problem, but this may not always be feasible such as in a school with only one SNA.

## 6. Discussion

**6.1** The school leaders who participated in these focus groups were largely positive about the role of SNAs in their schools, with a majority agreeing that the school would not be able to function properly without their support. It is clear that most participants hold SNAs in high regard and through effective leadership have developed school communities where SNAs are valued and supported.

**6.2** There was a sense that SNAs are considered an integral part of the school team, advocating for the student, noting and responding to behaviours of concern thereby contributing significantly to an improved school experience for all. SNAs often carry out duties outside their role description, bringing skills developed through previous career and/or life experience. This acts as a positive force when there is mutual regard and when role flexibility reflects a team approach in the school. In these conditions all staff (principal, teacher as well as SNAs) step outside their role description at times to provide the best possible educational experience for children and young people. This goodwill is essential for the effective functioning of schools as it is for all workplaces.

**6.3** Where goodwill and a team approach does not exist the requirement for role flexibility is seen differently which can present problems for school leaders in terms of managing care provision. Measures which work to generate goodwill include regular meetings with SNAs both as a group in their own right and as part of wider staff meetings where they have a voice in the school community. Clear communication of role requirements accompanied by regular feedback on performance is key, both at the outset when a SNA starts in a role and on an ongoing basis to maintain motivation.

**6.4** There are varying practices and approaches to the SNA role across schools and the need for clarity on the SNA role and a reworking of its unstructured form was a recurrent message from focus group participants. This points to a need to update the relevant circulars, [Circular 30/2014](#) and [Circular 71/2011](#) which are seen as vague and outdated. Provisions in Circular 71/2011 are seen as contentious to the point where some principals don't apply the 72 hours at all. This is a core role requirement of the SNA role, in place in the SNA contract of employment (as a 12-day arrangement) since 2005 when the first formal SNA role was introduced. It provides for essential duties such as care planning and



input to Student Support Plans which cannot ordinarily be carried out during school hours. The absence of planning for care provision is not in the best interests of the student.

**6.5** The gap between expectations and reality of the SNA role described by school leaders must be addressed in the SNA Workforce Development Plan. It points to a need for a communications programme to provide greater understanding of the SNA role. Consideration must be given to other measures that promote understanding of the role. SNA courses which clearly communicate role requirements including how the role applies in different school settings can contribute to achieving this objective.

**6.6** With the number of special classes in mainstream settings increasing there is a need to ensure SNA competence and confidence is maintained. This could be achieved through tailored training and through regular rotation of SNAs across the school. Mentoring and a structured induction programme can help newly appointed SNAs understand their new position and job requirements. For experienced SNAs, support through additional training when they are assigned to a new setting such as a special class or post-primary school is merited.

**6.7** The SNA is a key member of the team supporting the child with special education needs and it is essential in terms of ensuring they are effective in their role that they be involved in all planning meetings and provide input to the Additional Care Needs Plans (previously the PPP).

**6.8** The extent to which SNAs provide support for learning is also an area which needs to be explored to ensure it provides the best support to the student and does not interfere with teacher–student interaction. It is notable that research including Blatchford et al<sup>3</sup>. on the teaching assistant (TA) role shows a consistent negative relationship between the amount of support from TAs and pupils' academic progress. Research by Claire Jackson et al<sup>4</sup> also

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<sup>3</sup> Blatchford, P., Russell, A. and Webster, R., 2012. Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: How research challenges practice and policy. Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, C., Sharma, U., Odier-Guedj, D. & Deppeler, J. (2021). Teacher's Perceptions of Their Work with Teacher Assistants: A Systematic Literature Review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(11). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2021v46n11.5>

Jackson, C., Sharma, U. & Odier-Guedj, D. (2022). Secondary teachers' perspectives on their work with teacher assistants. 10.4324/9781003265580-13.

looks at the impact on student learning outcomes in the Australian context. Communication between the teacher and SNA on the type and level of support for learning being provided is essential to ensure the teacher is aware where a student is struggling.

**6.9** A strong relationship between SNAs and parents can confer huge benefits to the child if conducted correctly. To achieve these benefits, appropriate communication standards must be discussed and maintained through initial and ongoing training as well as induction to the SNA role.

**6.10** The relationship between the teacher and SNA is critically important in providing the best possible educational experience for students with additional and significant care needs. While both need to be clear on their roles in the classroom neither SNAs nor teachers currently receive training on adult interaction in the classroom. This training need must be addressed for both parties. This training need is supported by findings in the NCSE (2019) report [Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion](#).

**6.11** In considering policy direction it is important to address the risk of role creep where the SNA takes on work inconsistent with their role description. While transferable skills and role flexibility are important, they should not negatively impact on care provision such as where SNA duties are displaced by activities such as drama or PE coaching.

**6.12** In terms of Learning & Development the need for a structured CPD programme for SNAs is clearly indicated. This must involve a mandatory element and must address various school settings. School leaders who participated in the focus groups are open to schools clustering in-service days to facilitate SNA training at Education Centres or other venues. They consider ongoing CPD important to promote staff retention, maintain motivation and optimise performance. They expressed a need for a dedicated training budget for SNAs and authorisation for substitution where required.

**6.13** In terms of communication between school leaders and SNAs, a significant use of email was indicated. Email is an important communication tool providing a written record. Given the practical and frontline nature of the SNA role, time within the school day to read emails may be limited. There is risk therefore that the email may not be read or fully understood. Where the message relates to substantive issues related to the SNA role it is important that email is accompanied by face-to-face opportunities for discussion and

clarification. School leaders indicate that given the demands of the busy school day it is difficult for them to find time to read emails which means that communication may not be passed onto SNAs in a timely fashion. This too points to a need to allot time to regularly meet with SNAs to communicate information, provide a forum for queries and to provide feedback.

**6.14** The probation process for SNAs provides a mechanism for providing feedback and direction to SNAs and support must be provided to school leaders and boards of management on how to use this mechanism effectively to assess performance.

**6.15** Measures to address recruitment challenges such as inadequately prepared candidates and unrealistic expectations of the SNA role are required. These include standardisation of accredited SNA courses and promotion of the role.

**6.16** School leaders indicated strong support for centralised Garda vetting to facilitate mutual recognition across schools and expedite the hiring process for new and substitute SNAs. The participants welcomed news that the DE is working with stakeholders to achieve this objective.

**6.17** Diversity and inclusion in the workplace provide varied perspectives to tackle complex issues and leads to better informed and sustainable outcomes<sup>5</sup>. As population diversity increases in Ireland it is essential that school communities understand the values, beliefs and culture of wider society to adequately support and serve their needs. Lack of diversity in the SNA workforce is a challenge. While pay, lack of career progression and job insecurity were cited as barriers to diversity there are no indications that these factors are leading to a shortage of applicants overall.

**6.18** The diversity challenge seems to arise in relation to the composition of the pool of applicants for SNA posts. Proactive measures must be undertaken to address diversity including career promotion activities and exploring the potential for targeted recruitment.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Justice's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

**6.19** Training for Boards of Management on equality, diversity and inclusion will also be beneficial to this end.

**6.20** School leaders outlined management challenges associated with the SNA workforce. This included concerns about administration of medicine. DE policy provides that where a child requires adult assistance to assist in the administration of medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time, SNA support may be allocated for this purpose. Circular 0030/2014 refers to the administration of medication as one of the examples of the primary care needs which would be considered significant – and which might require SNA support.

**6.21** As outlined by school leaders, challenges may arise where a SNA takes on the bus escort role. This may impact their availability for reception and dispersal of students in their care at the beginning and end of the school day which is an important role requirement. It is acknowledged that this overlap in roles may be unavoidable in some instances due to recruitment challenges for the bus escort role. However, it is an area where clarification from DE on the policy approach would be helpful.

**6.22** Social dialogue between employers, voluntary and community organisations and trade unions in Ireland has, through successive public service pay agreements, delivered relative industrial peace<sup>6</sup>. The current Programme for Government<sup>7</sup> contains a commitment to continue this negotiation “anchored in the respect for the important role played by public servants”. While industrial peace is promoted through this approach there will be instances of workplace difficulties where relevant trade unions intervene to represent their members. Dialogue and consultation between employers and unions are key to resolving disputes and both need to engage meaningfully when difficulties arise.

**6.23** While the perception by school leaders is that the Exceptional Review process mainly results in a decrease in allocations, statistics from the NCSE indicate that there were five cases since 2022 that indicated a surplus in SNA Allocation and in 3 of these there was a level of reduction. The NCSE have also streamlined the process, now referred to as the SNA Review Process, to reduce the administration burden for schools.

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<sup>6</sup> Wallace et al. Industrial Relations in Ireland, Wallace et al.

**6.24** It was noted during the feedback that special schools, in particular, can have a large non-teaching staff to support. The DE announced in April 2024 that, from September 2024, all special schools may appoint an administrative deputy principal. This support will greatly reduce the administration burden on these schools.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

**7.1** The focus groups were arranged to seek school leaders' perspectives on the SNA role. These focus groups explored the challenges faced by school leaders and how these challenges could be overcome. It was interesting to note that many of the challenges cited by school leaders were also raised by SNAs in focus groups convened in May 2023.

**7.2** The evidence and insight gathered from the focus groups with school leaders provides input from their perspective which will inform policy decisions on the role of SNAs. The findings set out in this report will be shared with relevant areas within the DE and with relevant agencies and stakeholders with a view to convey information relevant to the work of the SNA and to identify areas for improvement.

**7.3** The following are the recommended actions for the DE arising from the focus groups. These actions will be considered by relevant working groups established for the SNA Workforce Development Plan:

- Review Circular 30/2014 on the role of the SNA to provide clarity to all stakeholders on the associated duties and responsibilities.
- Progress the review of the SNA contract including providing clarity on contracted hours, protocols around reception and dispersal of students before and after school and probation arrangements.
- Review provisions on the 72 hours and June working in [Circular 0071/2011](#) with a view to providing clear guidance to schools and school leaders.
- Develop a structured Learning and Development Programme which addresses the needs of both new and experienced SNAs and caters for various school settings i.e. primary, post primary and special schools.
- Review the minimum educational requirements for appointment to the SNA role.
- Explore the development of a SNA toolkit addressing the necessary resources, abilities and skills to work effectively in the SNA role.
- Include a module of practical skills training in the national training programme for SNAs.

- Work with [Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(qqi.ie\)](http://qqi.ie) and relevant stakeholders to ensure all SNA courses include a practical element and/or work experience to prepare students for the SNA role.
- Liaise with stakeholders to develop a communications programme promoting clarity and understanding of the role of the SNA.
- Liaise with relevant stakeholders to arrange cluster days for SNA training.
- Explore opportunities for SNAs to network and engage in peer-to-peer learning.
- In conjunction with relevant stakeholders develop a structured induction programme for SNAs to include training on GDPR, confidentiality and communication.
- Progress work to centralise Garda vetting for SNAs.
- Explore the case for a leadership role for SNAs with relevant stakeholders.
- Work with stakeholders to promote training for school leaders and Boards of Management on recruitment and selection including on unconscious bias.
- Work with stakeholders to promote training for school leaders on managing the SNA probation process.
- Explore ways to promote the SNA role as a career choice for school leavers and others.
- All school leaders should participate in NCSE training on deployment of SNAs.