



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

**EA Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in
Mainstream Schools**

INTO Response

INTRODUCTION

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the largest teachers' union in Ireland with over 50,000 members. The INTO has members in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools, including teachers at all stages of their career, from student teachers through to principals, and across all sectors of education in the North.

RESPONSE

An overall review of special education has been long awaited. The number of children and young people identified as needing specialist provision has increased, rapidly, in both volume and complexity, in terms of the needs they are presenting with, across all sectors in the last decade. INTO members have communicated, often, their concern about the changing profile of need in schools which has become increasingly apparent along with: the need for specific training; resourcing in preparation for change; and timely and purposeful responses from the EA when a child or young person's placement presents challenges.

INTO is aware that Special education has moved from the Directorate of CYPS at the EA to the Directorate for Education, however, the issues have fundamentally remained the same.

The presentation at this time of EAs framework causes immediate concern in that:

1. the failures identified in the NICCY report "Too little too late" and the NIAO report "Impact Review of SEN" have not been addressed in a meaningful way, INTO contends, in this future planning of SEN provision throughout the region. INTO believe these detailed & independent reports must be more fully taken on board by the EA and be the starting point of a revised Area Plan.
2. The Department of Education are currently consulting on new SEN regulations and an SEN Code of Practice. EA have not reflected DE's proposals within the Area plan consultations which were released simultaneously. The potential for EA and DE to move on SEN provision in a disjointed way from the outset is a clear danger which must be addressed now.

INTO does not feel that the consultation questionnaire [the 'Agree' 'Uncertain' 'Disagree' format] is the most appropriate mechanism to adequately reflect the concerns of INTO members. We have nonetheless endeavored to address some of the questions in the following bullet points:

- No specific clarity is provided in the paper as to how 'equity' and 'accessibility' will translate into increased provision for children and young people in mainstream schools. It certainly won't be achieved by removing teachers and classroom assistants currently employed to work with children and young people with identified special educational needs as suggested at 1.3.
- The description in the Draft Area Plan of specialist provision to be created, interestingly without any meaningful detail, compared to the previous widely understood learning support centers (as referred to in the Draft COP) is so vague as to be misleading. In the Draft COP LSCs refer to Learning Support Centers, there is no reference to the EA learning support classes (p.16) which EA are proposing to call "specialist provision classes". INTO is concerned that understanding of specialist provision as described in the paper and question no. 8 may be interpreted by consultees to mean: EA support services or additional provision provided by motivated professionals in schools, as outlined in the proposed Draft COP 'Special Educational provision' and will confuse the responses given. This will impact on the

consultees capacity to respond in a constructive manner.

INTO believe that DE and EA should ensure that confusions like this are resolved prior to publication of finished strategies and it further highlights the necessity of a clearer understanding by EA of what is intended for children with SEN.

- The draft framework raises a significant number of questions rather than presenting potential answers.

There is no specific provision identified for those with a visual or sensory impairment – are a number of services to remain external to the school?

EA support services have been in recent contact with teaching unions discussing the challenge of supporting and meeting need in mainstream schools. In these recent meetings with the Autism Advisory and Intervention Service we have discussed the 13,000 pupils currently diagnosed with autism, in the school system with 35 teachers/advisors/admin supporting them. It would appear the intention of this area plan is primarily in large part to relieve some of the strain on EA support services. The paper does not refer to the funding of support services or the expansion which will be essential to meet the demands that will arise from the DE Draft Code of Practice

INTO is of the view the Area Plan in not addressing all avenues of support and not addressing fundamental questions is repeating the failures of the previous CYPs regime and can therefore expect the same outcomes.

- The Pilot Scheme to be run, it appears, in parallel with this consultation, as part of DE transformation Program Project, “Delivering Schools for the Future” is aimed to develop, test and agree the process of establishment, closure or change of specialist provision. INTO seeks clarity on when the evaluation and consultation of the pilot will be shared with stakeholders and expects that be prior to EA moving to implement the changes it proposes in this paper. It is also unclear whether EA, in proposing the changes to provision in the pilot schools, has adequately considered whether the changes in provision amount to a fundamental change to the nature of these schools and require a development proposal to be developed, submitted and approved. It appears EA concern is primarily to see specialist provision located in sustainable schools as defined by a policy which is presently 12 years old and may well be further outdated by the time these proposals come to be implemented. INTO stresses that any future changes through area planning will require full funding and resourcing being made available to the pilot schools not only for the duration of the pilot but ring fenced and guaranteed into the future. The paper also fails to reference the fact that specialist staff will have to be identified and provided with ongoing development opportunities if this specialist provision is to be better than that which it seeks to replace. INTO is disappointed this important consideration is not referenced in the paper.
- INTO notes that the EA makes repeated reference to ‘geographical inconsistencies’ – are these inconsistencies presenting a crisis for SEN provision in these areas? Is a focus on the geographical location of provision missing actual specific areas of SEN need?
- Question 8 refers to specialist provision – INTO believes all SEN pupils should have their identified needs supported and resourced (a belief reflected in the draft COP). What is not made clear is how the placement of a child or young person in a school’s specialist provision (as identified in the EA framework) would be agreed. Will this be done by the school or the EA using a statement of need?
- INTO calls on EA to share evaluations of current specialist provision & support services. Has there been a review and identification of strengths and challenges in the existing 93 schools mainstream schools providing specific specialist provision and what steps is EA taking to capitalize on the current systems positive elements?

Has the existing specialist provision proved to be 'flexible and agile' (p.12)? With diagnosis of ASD at the highest levels in Europe and indications that there will be no reduction in numbers, are EA support services an urgent area of review that is being missed? How will the recommendations of the NICCY Report "Too little too late" be implemented?

- There is no reference made in the Draft framework to funding or resourcing. Flexibility in responding to the changing profile of pupil need requires access to staff, training and resources. This needs to be addressed to give real meaning to this consultation exercise.
- In relation to Question 10.2 INTO would stress that the solution to lack of available places in special schools is to expand special school provision. Rising numbers of children and young people presenting with special needs in mainstream school settings cannot be wholly related to the change of provision in special schools implemented by EA CYPS in previous years. The expansion of the specialist provision in mainstream schools has the potential to support the children and young people with SEN in mainstream classrooms who are struggling to achieve their full potential and focus on their personal outcomes, who would benefit from a *"modified curriculum that offers greater opportunity to balance learning opportunities with that of developing important life and social skills"* (p.5) and in some cases maintain their placements in their local school. Special schools provide a specific and more specialised levels of support. This framework should be seeking to appropriately equip schools to handle the levels and variety of need that children are presenting within mainstream schools currently and going forward.

INTO welcomes the acknowledgment from the EA throughout this framework document that smaller class size benefits children and young people's access to education and improves outcomes. Reducing class sizes across the system would be a definite step towards more meaningful inclusion but is dependent on sufficient levels of funding and resourcing to make it a reality.

Finally, INTO reiterates their concern at the number of consultations running concurrently between EA and DE on the area of special educational needs and provision. Confusion of definition and identification is exemplified throughout the 4 current consultations. Mistakes made in the past must be acknowledged. Special educational provision, teachers, pupils and parents will be failed by a continued disjointed approach there is an opportunity now to address this, let us take it.