

Report on National Disability Authority / National Council for Special Education seminar on supporting transitions for children with disabilities into and out of pre-school

Introduction

This report is based on the proceedings of a seminar held in October 2013. The seminar was a joint venture between the National Disability Authority and the National Council for Special Education. The seminar brought together people from across the sectors of children, education and health which included policy makers, parents and practitioners.

The key focus for the seminar was to look at the important area of transitioning into and out of early education for children with disabilities and children with special educational needs.

It is well documented how important early intervention is to support children who learn differently. Investment in the early years pays huge dividends not only in terms of long term benefits in savings to the state in general, but in maximising the potential of children with disabilities to learn and grow and become part of the local community.

Over the years Government policy has been consistent in stressing that people with disabilities have access to mainstream services and participate on an equal footing. This was an important perspective in the deliberations during the seminar. Another feature of the day was the exploration of the respective roles played by the relevant government departments; the workshops on good practice; and the active participation of people at the workshops in critically exploring, from their shared experiences, how best to address the issues that impact on the quality of early intervention and early learning for children with disabilities.

All participants had an opportunity to engage in the three workshops on:

- Facilitating inclusion for children with additional needs within Early Childhood Care and Education services- a model of practice
- Transitioning in practice from pre-school to primary school
- Early Education –Working with children with special needs and their families

Key learning

The National Disability Authority identified the following as key learning that would enhance the quality of the transitioning process into and out of early education for children with disabilities and special needs:

National policy on inclusion

There is a need for a **national policy on inclusion** for the pre-school sector which outlines best practice and clearly communicates how the transitions into and out of pre-school should be supported for children with disabilities / special education needs.

This inclusive policy would:

- Ensure consistency of approach nationally
- Foster and embed a strong culture of inclusion within Early Childhood Care and Education sector
- Promote good practice

Training of early years practitioners

There is a need for a standardised approach for both informal and formal training for early years' practitioners. A standardised approach would systematically contribute to gradually increasing the minimum qualifications, as well as, building the confidence and competency of early years' practitioners in working with children with disabilities in an inclusive fashion. The training, at initial and ongoing levels would include, such things, as:

- Disability awareness training , including autism
- Inclusive approaches to diversity
- Differentiation in play for children with disabilities and varying abilities
- Basic manual handling
- Speech and language development
- When/where to refer children where difficulties become apparent for children in pre-school without a diagnosis
- Transition support, including the importance of communication with parents/guardians

Assessment

There is a need for an appropriate national system of identifying needs of children with disabilities prior to engagement with Early Childhood Care and Education

settings. In this regards, there is an important role for 0-18 Progressing Disability Services teams at local level. The development of protocols between the pre-school sector and the Health Service Executive for advancing this would be important.

Similarly, when a child is transitioning from pre-school to primary schools, it is critical to have a coherent co-ordinated structure at local level for various stakeholders – Health Service Executive, Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs), National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS), pre-school, primary and parents. This is critical for the advanced planning that is required for a child, particularly those with complex needs, transitioning to primary schools. It would also facilitate transitioning in a seamless fashion and that children and parents have access to appropriate assessment and supports as required.

Support

The need for support was identified for:

- Early school practitioners
- Parents/family
- Children

The National Disability Authority noted that, through examples cited during the seminar, the Early Childhood Care and Education settings that had received support, in the past, to include a child with a disability, tend to need less support for inclusion over time. Support for early years' practitioners can be provided through such programmes as **Better Start**¹ and the Early Years advisers, while support from HSE is available for when more therapeutic support/expertise may be required. There is also an important role for a mentoring programme for Early Childhood Care and Education settings and could address issues like:

- How therapies can be integrated within Early Childhood Care and Education settings
- Working with parents on how routines in pre-school can also be practised at home
- Adapting materials used in the Early Childhood Care and Education settings for children with disabilities

¹ **Better Start** is a national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in Early Years Education and Care (ECCE) for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland.

There is also an important role for a support worker in focussing on the needs of the family and the child.

Support for children and family should:

- Be planned for and timely
- Start in the home prior to a child entering Early Childhood Care and Education
- Empower parents in knowing what is needed, where to go, who to contact etc
- Enable families choose and approach a school
- Be an integral part of the Early Childhood Care and Education settings

Communication/information

A number of examples of good practice in Early Childhood Care and Education settings were presented on the day. However, the sharing of that good practice is not done in a structured way nationally throughout the Early Years sector.

Similarly, there is a lack of a coordinated structure for the provision of information to parents and families. Some parents got information through being involved with support groups or through knowing other parents. However, not all parents are connected in this way or have such networks.

The information needed by families ranged from knowing what they need for primary schools, the timeframes when enrolment commenced to do they require assessments or can they visit a school prior to enrolment to where do they get support and help and who basically does what when it comes to supporting a child with a disability.

What is required is a one stop shop approach to ensuring that both families and early years practitioners have up to date, accurate and accessible information regarding:

- Early Childhood Care and Education supports and services
- Transition supports and services available when a child is moving from pre-school to primary

Clear pathway in transitioning

There is a need for a national template on transitioning to be developed for children with disabilities and special needs transitioning into and out of Early Childhood Care and Education settings. This template should be informed by the good practice which is available in some of the County Childcare Committee

areas. Such a template should bring clarity to, such things, as the role and responsibilities of different agencies and services; the formalisation of the “handover” from pre-school to primary; the use of a “passport” type system for children with special needs and the critical timeframes for actions to be completed so that the required supports and services are in place when a child begins primary schooling.

Workshop I - Facilitating inclusion for children with additional needs within Early Childhood Care and Education services- a model of practice

A model of practice in County Roscommon

The workshop was commenced with a presentation by Irene Cafferky, manager of the Roscommon County Childcare Committee. Mary McLoughlin (Department of Children and Youth Affairs) chaired the session.

Irene presented on a model for supporting children with disabilities in mainstream early education and care (Early Childhood Care and Education) settings which has been developed in Roscommon by a partnership, consisting of:

- Brothers of Charity Services , Roscommon
- Roscommon Early Intervention Services (Health Service Executive)
- Roscommon County Childcare Committee

The partnership emerged from a pilot programme funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform’s Enhancing Disability Services Programme. Evidence of the need for support for children with disabilities in Roscommon to participate in mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education settings was established by a 2005 Trinity College research study commissioned by the Roscommon County Childcare Committee.

The pilot programme resulted in the development of a protocol for inclusion. The purpose of the protocol is to provide a mechanism to plan for the inclusion of a child with additional needs in Early Childhood Care and Education settings. The protocol sets out the roles of each of the partner agencies, which include:

- Early Childhood Care and Education settings
- The support worker – Special Needs Assistant type role allocated to the setting for a number of hours a week
- The mentor – professional from disability support agency who advises on strategies for including the child

- The disability support agency – Brothers of Charity Services, Roscommon
- Parents /guardians
- Roscommon county childcare committee and the Roscommon Early Teams Intervention Services, Health Service Executive

In addition, the protocol contains a template for planning the how a child will be supported in a number of key areas, such as:

- Physical adaptations
- Communication
- Intimate /personal care
- Play/social interaction
- Parent concerns
- Other

The agency responsible for the implementation of each action is named in the protocol.

The protocol provides a mechanism for sharing information about a child and the family's needs among support agencies, in a way, that respects their privacy and conforms with the requirements for data protection.

The development and operation of the protocol has resulted in increased trust and respect between agencies and professionals involved.

Training has been provided, and continues to be provided, to the Early Childhood Care and Education setting staff on key topics related to the inclusion of children with disabilities. All Early Childhood Care and Education settings are encouraged to participate in the training and not just those who may have a child with a disability in their services at that time. Training topics covered have included:

- Introduction to behaviour support
- Speech and language development
- Disability awareness
- Basic manual handling
- Introduction to communication
- Lámh sign language
- Child development
- Autism awareness

- Transition support, including the importance of communication with parents/guardians

Points raised in the subsequent discussion

Irene's presentation stimulated a lot of interest and discussion. A number of points were discussed or elaborated on, including.

- Children who receive pre-school support are in one of the disability services. However, Early Childhood Care and Education settings can refer children, who are not in a service, to the appropriate service provider for an assessment. **Assessments and support**, where warranted, can be arranged within a matter of weeks. All children, therefore, receiving support from this model will have had a prior multi-disciplinary assessment
- The **County Childcare Committee** facilitate the protocol meeting as they are not involved in direct support to the child, and are, thereby, impartial in relation to discussion on support to be provided. The County Childcare Committee has a role in supporting parents prior to and during the protocol meeting where this is necessary
- By the end of the protocol meeting a **support plan** will have been developed and decision around the allocation of support and mentoring will have been taken and are written into the protocol document
- The **support worker** is typically only allocated for a small number of hours a week and that allocation will in all cases be reviewed every three months. It is made clear to parents that that allocation can be reduced or increased depending on the child's needs
- The **role of the mentor** was discussed. In Roscommon, the mentor advises on the following topics:
 - How best the Early Childhood Care and Education setting can utilise the support worker hours
 - How therapies can be integrated in Early Childhood Care and Education routines
 - How materials can be adapted for use in the Early Childhood Care and Education setting
 - Working with parents to ensure routines are practiced at home as well as in the Early Childhood Care and Education settings
- It was noted that parents / guardians can (re)call a **protocol meeting** when an issue arises for them
- A significant issue that has arisen for Early Childhood Care and Education providers is **communicating to parents** of children who may have a delay but are not currently linked to any disability service. Training has been

provided to Early Childhood Care and Education staff around broaching the subject of delay with parents who may not be anticipating such a discussion

- Local **early intervention / disability service staff** have been utilised for the delivery of training in practical strategies for including children with disabilities
- A question was raised about how the Roscommon model fitted with **Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People**. After a discussion it was suggested that there was no obvious reason why they wouldn't operate well together
- It was noted that there are **other good examples** of work related to pre-school inclusion going on around the country:
 - **Mayo**, from where the Roscommon model was adopted, are developing a **pre-school support assessment tool**
 - **Waterford** has developed a successful **Empowering Parents Programme** to support parents of preschool children to advocate for their child. The programme has also led to the development of a parents' network.
 - **Donegal** has run a Early Childhood Care and Education -to-school **transition programme** aimed at all children but which would have particular benefits for children with disabilities or emerging special educational needs
 - In **Waterford Speech and Language Therapists** had worked with Early Childhood Care and Education settings where there had been Early Childhood Care and Education high rates of referral for speech and language therapy to up-skill Early Childhood Care and Education staff in basic speech and language therapy skills
 - There has been collaborative work done in **North Tipperary**, whereby, the Early Intervention team have **up-skilled Early Childhood Care and Education staff to identify development delay and to intervene** in more straightforward cases
- Reflecting on the above it was noted that while there may be significant challenges, it is still very positive to **showcase** some of the good practice that exists in Ireland by way of a conference or booklet, etc
- The **role of transition coordinators** in Roscommon was highlighted. These are staff from the Brothers of Charity Services, who work with families over a two year cycle covering the Early Childhood Care and Education year and the first year of statutory schooling. The transition coordinators:
 - Support families in choosing and approaching a school
 - Assist the school in developing an Individual Education Plan

- Visit the school and liaise with the teacher in the child's first year of school
- It was noted, that in the Roscommon experience, the **Early Childhood Care and Education settings** that had received **support** in the past to include a child with a disability, tend to need less support for inclusion over time

Who needs to be involved in the transitions in and out of pre-school?

After discussion it was suggested that those who needed to be involved in transitions were:

Transition into pre-school

- Parents
- Early Childhood Care and Education staff
- Children, as far as possible

It was noted that parents of children, with and without disabilities, often only choose an Early Childhood Care and Education setting in July or August, which militates against having arrangements in place for the child in the first week of September.

Preschool-to-school transition

- Parents
- class teachers
- Special Education Needs Coordinators
- Early intervention team / disability service
- School age disability services
- Early Childhood Care and Education key staff member

What should be their role?

It was suggested that **parents** should be central to this process and that some parents may need some support to fully participate in the transition planning process.

It was also noted, as was highlighted in the Donegal transitions programme, that many parents are reluctant to pass on information to schools, if their child has a disability / special educational need, as they feel their child may not get a place in that school or that their child will have a label in school that they, as parents, are not comfortable with.

The reluctance of some teachers to accept a **report on children's learning style and strengths** was noted. However, it was noted that such information would be invaluable to resource teachers.

There was agreement that work, building on existing practice in some areas, on improving how information on children's learning style and strengths is captured, in the Early Childhood Care and Education setting, in a standardised way and communicated to class teachers, resource teachers and Special Education Needs Organisers, would benefit all children. All children should have a transition statement / report prepared by their Early Childhood Care and Education setting based on their observations over an extended period of time. However, it would be beneficial to children with disabilities and / special educational needs in particular. In the cases of children with disabilities / special educational needs the transition statement should be in the same format but be differentiated as appropriate and contain relevant supplementary information where that is available.

The fact that the Special Education Needs Organisers, in some cases, will have no **link to Early Childhood Care and Education settings** was identified as a shortcoming in the current transition process. This is an example of structural issue which can hinder successful transitions. Another example is that the National Educational Psychology Service, unlike its Northern Ireland counterpart, does not have a role in supporting pre-school children.

Although Special Education Needs Organisers and National Educational Psychology Service's psychologist are not required to work with pre-school children, all the evidence suggests that **earlier intervention** is better for children and more cost effective.

Also, early Intervention teams should have responsibility for children until they are six, thereby ensuring **continuity across the pre-school to school transition**. However, while this is envisaged by the Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People programme it is not the practice in all areas.

The fact that many primary school teachers and many Early Childhood Care and Education Services have had quite **limited training in special education needs**, was seen as something which can hinder transitions of children with such needs.

It was noted that some **primary schools**, usually where a principal has taken an interest, have established links with local Early Childhood Care and Education settings. This significantly helps the transition process. However, many other schools don't have such linkages.

The **Síolta Quality Assurance Programme**² review identified a practice, whereby, children entering schools brought items important to them as a way of stimulating discussion about their life and their interests. There is a need to develop such strategies aimed at ensuring that **children themselves are central to the transitions process.**

It was noted that the Early Childhood Care and Education staff have shown great **flexibility** to date in terms of training and up-skilling and in terms of including children with disabilities, sometimes, with complex disabilities, in the absence of the types of support structures available to schools. This flexibility is an important asset in terms of pre-school inclusion and in terms of successful transitions for young children into schools.

What training is required?

- Training for Early Childhood Care and Education Services around equality / diversity and disability
- Training for Early Childhood Care and Education Services around communicating with parents and health professional
- Training for Early Childhood Care and Education Services around identifying emerging development delay

Initial training and up-skilling /continuous professional development for Early Childhood Care and Education Services should have a **greater focus on special educational need.**

It was suggested that some **training around transitions** should be jointly delivered to Early Childhood Care and Education, health and education staff. All professionals / professions tend to issues from within their own professional training & experience. Shared training may facilitate the various professionals better understand the view point of other professionals.

More **training around transitioning children with autism** into and out of pre-schools is required.

² **Síolta Quality Assurance Programme** was developed to allow Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings to engage formally with the **Síolta Quality Framework.**

Workshop 2: Transitioning in practice: a pupil with special educational need – from pre-school to primary, a case study

This workshop commenced with presentations made by Margaret Kennedy (Special Education Needs Organisers), Ciara de Loughrey (National Educational Psychology Service) and Aisling Curley (Department of Education and Skills) chaired the session.

Case study presentation

The case in question concerned a young girl in County Kilkenny who had delayed developmental stages. She began speaking when she was two years of age. At the age of three, she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. She attended a therapeutic pre-school from the age of three and a half. More difficulties emerged during this time and at four years of age she was diagnosed with mild autism. While at this time, her psychological assessment showed cognitive scores within the low average range, her adaptive behaviour scores were a cause of concern.

Transition process

Transition process to primary school ran from approximately January to June of pre-school Year and involved:

- Consultation between the Special Education Needs Organiser and both the parent and the primary school. The initial meeting with the parent took place during an informal parents morning organised by Enable Ireland
- Exploratory visits to the primary schools in area
- Enrolment in the primary school
- The primary school made an application to the National Council for Special Education for resource teaching hours and access to a special needs assistant
- The Special Education Needs Organiser visited the pre-school to identify the child's care needs
- In similar cases, the principals of special schools / special classes would also attend such a visit where the child is transferring to a special setting
- Special Education Needs Organiser recommended to the primary school that they should consult with National Educational Psychology Service and the Special Education Support Service
- The Special Education Needs Organiser also suggested that the primary school teacher should visit the pre-school but this wasn't possible in this particular instance

- The early intervention team held a discharge meeting in June. Attendees included the Health Service Executive, the early intervention team and Enable Ireland. The Special Education Needs Organiser regarded this meeting as very important
- Further informal consultation took place between the National Council for Special Education and the National Educational Psychology Service at a local level
- The primary school ran a summer camp for all incoming pupils, which proved to be of great benefit to this child

School Preparation

- The primary school had an informal consultation with the National Educational Psychology Service (as an unnamed student) before the child entered the school. The National Educational Psychology Service assisted with:
 - Advice on a transition plan
 - Familiarisation with the child's special education needs (in liaison with the pre-school)
 - Development of an initial support plan, in conjunction with the school's learning support/resource teacher
 - The school accessing a greater understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder and cerebral palsy
 - The school meeting with the parents
 - The child's behaviour received particular consideration, as the challenging behaviour had emerged as the child's greatest need.

Current Position

- The child is enrolled in Junior Infants in a mainstream school
- Supports are in place
- Unfortunately, the school's assigned National Educational Psychology Service's psychologist is on leave. Accordingly, the school has been assigned a scheme for the commissioning of psychological assessments
- The school continues to adapt to the child's needs, as much as possible, and is facilitating her inclusion and integration into the school community
- The Special Education Needs Organiser may apply for further supports within the school
- The school staff have expressed interest in pursuing further special education related training

- The child also receives support from Enable Ireland

What worked well in this case

- Enable Ireland facilitating the initial introductory meeting
- Having early informal contacts between the National Educational Psychology Service and the Special Education Needs Organiser
- Having early contact between the Special Education Needs Organiser and the parents
- Enable Ireland visiting the primary school in advance
- Having the appropriate supports in place for September (at the start of the school year)
- The availability of the National Educational Psychology Service to support the school
- The early intervention team holding the discharge meeting in May
- The child attending the summer camp in school

Critical points to consider

- Involvement of the primary school prior to the transfer from pre-school
- Formalisation of “handover” from pre-school to primary similar to handover from primary to second level
- Development of a student file similar to the education passport being proposed by National Council for Curriculum Assessment
- Critical Time – plan early with involvement of all stakeholders
- Schools prioritising incoming special education needs pupils for the National Educational Psychology Service
- The National Educational Psychology Service attendance at the early intervention team discharge meeting

Points raised during the subsequent discussion

Variation in pre-school practice

The lack of uniformity around pre-schools and their practice was raised as a significant issue.

Key person to facilitate transition

The quality and extent of the paperwork supporting the child’s transition from pre-school to primary is inconsistent. There can be a large volume of paperwork available but no pulling together of documentation or individualised education plans. A key person should have responsibility to collate this information. There

should be a standardised approach, perhaps in the context of 0-18 framework which has a very good model for transitions.

At the moment, it is the parent/guardian (or key-worker) that provides the information about the child. It was pointed out that Special Education Needs Organisers are available to work on the transition of a child from pre-school to primary.

Enrolment in primary school

Transition to primary school requires advance planning so the non-selection of a primary school in a timely manner was highlighted as an area of concern. In addition, children can be enrolled in more than one school and parents then wait to see which school accepts the child. This can also result in delays. Different cut off times for enrolment in different schools is also problematic. Transition planning takes time.

Schools do not always fully understand the complexity of needs prior to children commencing in the school. The benefit of the summer camp pre-commencement in school was highlighted.

Proposed new enrolment legislation and a uniform enrolment date should have a positive impact on this difficulty.

Parents need more information

Choosing the right primary school is a huge decision for parents. It is important to get the family to engage in this process in a timely manner. Parents also need information, about the role of the special needs assistant in a primary school setting - the National Council for Special Education Information booklet for parents and the new guidelines for parents on choosing a school should be of assistance in helping parents in these matters.

As there are different structures around the country, parents also need information about how to trigger the appropriate assessment/supports.

Roles of stakeholders

There needs to be a proper understanding of the role of all stakeholders (in both the health and education sectors). It should be clarified which of the key stakeholders takes the lead in facilitating the transition period for the child.

The roles of National Educational Psychology Service, the National Council for Special Education, etc. need to be explained to parents. This can best be done through local fora.

There is pressure on the Health Service Executive staff to provide professional reports by certain dates for enrolment in primary schools and this can dilute professional time. The National Council for Special Education's proposal for a new model for allocation of resources is expected to be submitted next year and this may have an impact on the number of assessments required for the purpose of resource allocation.

The "range of assessments taking place" was also raised as an issue. A suggestion was made that a template be devised to standardise and curtail the information required.

Co-location of the National Educational Psychology Service's psychologists and the National Council for Special Education's Special Education Needs Organisers works well, where it is in place.

Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People

The early intervention teams/school aged teams are available in certain regions and provide valuable support. Sometimes, this overlaps with a voluntary body/organisation. The transition assessments from the early intervention team are very useful, but, it is not yet possible to have these in all cases.

The early intervention teams are now prepared to train pre-school staff as to when/where to refer children where difficulties become apparent for children who enter pre-school without a diagnosis.

Dublin was cited as an area where it is particularly difficult to plan, as the referral comes from many different sources. It is difficult to establish where a central point is in Dublin. It is also problematic because, historically, voluntary bodies have worked with different categories of disability. However, it was acknowledged that the **Progressing Disability Services** should resolve these difficulties over time as the early intervention teams will have geographical basis.

The **Progressing Disabilities Services** has the potential to ensure that good practice is consistent around the country. However, the language can be off-putting for parents, in particular, the use of the phrase 'disabilities'.

Other issues

Other issues raised include:

- The issue of appropriate training in special education needs for all staff, including teachers
- Resources at local level
- Make **Progressing Disabilities Services** transition template available on the Health Service Executive's website

Workshop 3 - Early Education – Working with children with special needs and their families

This workshop commenced with a presentation from Caroline Cantan (co-ordinator), Geraldine Massey (Early Educator) and Erica Calder (Social Worker) – Enable Ireland Children Services Team. The session was chaired by Kieran Smyth (Department of Health).

The presentation informed people about the Enable Ireland Tallaght service in West Dublin for about 160 children and young people aged from birth to 18 years. The average age of referral was between 12-18 months. The key themes presented on included

- The interdisciplinary approach taken
- Focus of service is on assisting each family to maximise their child's independence and participation
- Stages in pathway to school from early development and play skills – early education support group- finding a pre-school- assistance and support when child starts- ongoing support- finding a primary school and continuing support
- Case studies were then presented on how this works in practice
- The issue of personal assistants in pre-school and how individual assistance can be provided by the pre-school in certain situations and where there are a few may need a full or part time pre-school assistant
- Barriers to inclusion in mainstream pre-school and school. These ranged from the physical building – attitudes-social inclusion opportunities – family disadvantage to family stresses and the health of the child
- Addressing barriers – which ranged from early identification – training staff-sensitive facilitation for social interaction to effective communication between pre-school/school and disability teams about the child and family needs

Points raised during the subsequent discussion

The key focus of the discussion within the workshop was on what systemic changes, if any, are required to achieve successful transitions at a policy level?

Supports for children

For children with significant needs, supports need to start **in the home**, before the child reaches pre-school. Some children, for example, those who were born very pre-mature may require significant support around every day activities and also dealing with separation issues in associated with going to pre-school.

The supports need to be **child and family focused**. Part of this support will be about helping parents “to see” that their child could attend a mainstream pre-school with his /her peers.

Families will need **support in finding and engaging with a school** around supports for their child and also in preparing their child for school and developing the practical skills required to be independent in school.

Supports need to be aimed at getting the child and family through the process as easily as possible

How services have developed over the years impacts on what supports are available locally. An example given was of a provider exclusively supporting children with intellectual disability in a pre-school but doesn't support children with autism.

Having supports in place prior to a child starting in a school

An example mentioned was of a school where a variety of children with disabilities were attending. The school set aside a **room** where **therapy** could take place, to minimise the hours / days children would miss school due to attending appointments.

Another aspect of support is having a disability awareness programme for other children in the group /class.

Early Intervention Team, Special Education Needs Organisers, Parents and Principals need to **work together** to jointly plan for the child's needs.

Complex needs cases – child with medical conditions may need a lot of care and the support that was in place in early education setting, such as, a care assistant and a key worker being involved in advising Special Needs Assistant and/or personal assistant within a primary school setting.

Another case cited about the complexity of child with a disability [autism] one child with the disability may have a number of complex issues while their twin with the same disability may have none and how you find accommodation for both within the same school setting.

One size does not fit all – some children with very complex need a specific resource. Special pre-school should be part of the service mix – policy should be focused on the **needs of the family and the child**.

Pre-school provision

An example raised was about **not having a suitable pre-school** and as a result have not built up the relationship between the pre-school a child goes to and the local primary school.

The **experience** a child with a disability has, at pre-school, encourages children “to give it a go” when it comes to primary school.

There is an issue with the pre-school **regulations** around, such things as, continence management. If an inspector was to visit the pre-school a parent gave an example of where her child was asked not attend that day.

Stairs in some pre-schools have created issues and, while some have been worked on and resolved, there is no obligation on pre-schools to provide for **access**. This can impact on the choice parents have and where they can send their child who may require access.

When **assessments** are carried out they need to be done in a timely fashion to fit with the March schedule for schools

Resources/funding

An example of a situation in Donegal was mentioned. The Health Service Executive does not have **resources** to support children in pre-school. This impacts on families for example, parents giving up employment to care for their child.

The pressure on parents to get a **diagnosis** in order to get resources [in the education system] and the need for a different resource model to operate between early childhood care and education and the primary sector.

There was never a **national structure** for pre-schools and, as a result, there are challenges around funding for children with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Information

Parents need information on when they need to have assessments and what supporting information they need for primary school, as they have to deal with **timeframes** that are operating for primary schools and around the different assessment systems. Information is available on this process but parents don't know how to access it.

Parents need to know timelines in all sectors and the lead in times that are required, as well as, the enrolment policies for schools.

Some parents get the information from being involved with other services but some of parents are **not linked in with any service**.

Social media – parents **support group** and a number of groups for parents of children with rare diseases play an important role in information provision.

Parents support networks have also run events like theme days, for example, toys for children with special needs.

People have no idea what **Citizens Information Board**³ is there for. The role of Citizens Information Boards needs to be better publicised.

There is a need for one **website** where parents of children with disabilities can get all the information that they need [pre-school, education and health supports] – in this regard there is a need to look at the Citizens Information Board's role in relation to information provision. In this context the following website was also cited as a useful resource for information www.specialneedsparents.ie.

For some of the **immigrant population** disability is a stigma and hence there is a great reluctance to seek help or ask people for information.

GP and public health nurses are critical as they are the first point of contact.

Progressing Disability Services (0-18)

Information was shared about the **local implementation teams** that are being established around the country for the implementation of the Progressing Disability Services for children and young people and the role that parents have to play in these new structures.

While the role of parent representation and working with the Early Intervention Teams was acknowledged, it was also stressed that at a national level there is an **inter-departmental health and education forum** and that is where parent representation is also critical. The local and national structures need to work together.

Childcare committees – partnership approaches

Clare County Childcare committee is working with the local Early Intervention team and Special Education Needs Organisers. It is critical to have

³ The Citizens Information Board is the national agency responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice and advocacy on social services, and for the provision of the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

meetings early in the education year (November) to ensure that supports are in place in the following September

Passport model used by **Sligo** County Childcare committee and the collaboration with the HSE early intervention services is critical to this.

A specific issue raised was in relation to the role of the **Child and Family Agency**. This Agency is supposed to have a role in relation to all children what will their role be in relation to young children with disabilities / special education needs requires clarification and how it will; work in partnership with the other agencies involved.

Policy

There is a need for a **national policy on inclusion** for the pre-school sector which outlines best practice and clearly communicates how the transitions into and out of pre school should be supported for children with disabilities / special education needs.

The pre-school to primary linkages are critical and there is a need for a national consistent approach developed with a **clear pathway**. The pathway should address issues like:

- Two year pre-school provision for children with a disability. Equity and equality for all is an issue in relation to this
- How it would work with early intervention services
- The process for a coordinated and cooperative approach to support services with a clear support structure
- Needs to be a consistent national seamless transition process
- An agreed assessment framework within which the needs of children going into national school are identified

There needs to be a consistency of **approaches** (between what health, education and pre-school provide) and a consistency in how we support children and families within the pre-school sector. Issues raised in relation to this include:

- Pre-school Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) exist in some places and not in others
- Dual placements have developed in some local areas but there is no national policy and issues like transport can be an issue
- Pre-schools are in general private businesses and that impacts on their ethos, there are a huge range of actors in the pre-school sector
- Private pre-schools do not have to let support services into their service

- It is very hard to get equipment in pre-schools, for example, changing tables
- Information and protocols need to be developed to ensure consistency

There is an opportunity for national policy to drive resources, also the emphasis on individualised funding in the report on **Transforming Lives - the Value for Money and Policy Review of Disability Services** should be considered in this context.

Training

There is a clear need to **disability awareness training** in the early education sector.

Services don't necessarily come with an inclusive model, inclusive mindset, they need training and support and training around how to **differentiate** play in pre-schools for children with disabilities.

Inclusion is not just about being pleasant, it is about good quality social and emotional interaction programmes through play.

FETAC level 5 does not cover disability / special education needs, there is no in-service available. Limerick developed a DVD called "what difference" to address this.

Attitude is critical – equality /diversity module in training (that includes disability) is critical .

It is a **low funded sector**, staff /settings usually have to do training out of their own resources.

Transitions

It is really important to bring people together on this issue of transition.

Transition is about planning for a child's future education. Transition needs to be an integral part of planning at pre-school level. It needs to be a systematic process from pre-school to primary to secondary and beyond.

If a child is with the early intervention team there is generally no problem, but for a host of other children, who are not coming from an early intervention team setting, there can be big issues in making the transition.

Pre-school

Planning is critical, talking to parents about their education options from when their child is two and half to three years of age is very important.

Parents need to be presented with all their options.

Providing an opportunity for the child to settle down in a new setting is important. Some cited the example of bringing the child into pre-school and in so doing people can jointly identify the appropriate level of support that may be required and/or how the practice can be re-adjusted. Some of this requires only minor differences in the approach taken with other children.

Primary to secondary

There are challenges within school and it can manifest itself at different points in 1st, 4th and 6th class and then the transition to secondary schools. It appears that lots of people are going back to special schools at this point, because of the challenges of integration and **inclusion** at second level for some students with special needs.