

A qualitative study of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after school

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Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais
National Disability Authority



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National Council for Special Education



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1 Executive summary synthesising main findings

1.1. Introduction

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) have been requested by the Minister for Education and Skills to conduct a comprehensive review of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme. The NCSE has asked the National Disability Authority to contribute to this review by undertaking a qualitative study of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after they finish formal schooling. RSM PACEC have been commissioned by the National Disability Authority to carry out this research.

At the request of the NCSE, a small scale qualitative study was completed. The aim of this qualitative study was to ascertain the views of young people with disabilities and personnel who have direct dealings with them– in further education/training/work sectors- on how prepared they believe students with disabilities are for life after school.

In doing so, the study captured the experience of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after they finish formal schooling. This includes transitioning into higher/further education; training; adult day services and the world of work. The study focused on both the post-school supports young people currently have or need in order to actively participate in and engage in these key areas of life, as well as the Special Needs Assistant supports they had in school and the level and adequacy of same in enabling them to prepare for life after school and make the necessary transition to further education/higher education, work; training or adult day services.

The study also ascertained the views and experiences of school personnel (principals, teachers, Special Needs Assistants, parents) on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the Special Needs Assistant scheme in preparing these students for the next stage of life after school.

The study gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders including the young people with disabilities, parents of young people with disabilities, and staff from post school environments including adult day services, Further Education and Higher Education and employers.

1.2. Context for the study

This section briefly explores some important contextual issues for this study. It sets the scene for the analysis of views arising from the research, emerging findings, conclusions and potential areas for attention.

The role of the SNA, as defined by the Department of Education, is quite tightly prescribed, but the understanding and delivery of the role appears to be somewhat varied in practice. Whilst SNAs may contribute to preparing young people for life after school, this takes place within a wider systemic context, and the extent of, or any distinctions between, support roles are not always clear to the various stakeholders interviewed in the course of this study. However, interesting points raised by study participants highlight the areas of support that they feel have a key role in preparing students with disabilities for post school activities, which come within the role of the SNA as they understand it or the role of others as informed by experience in many cases. As such, the role of the SNA cannot be reviewed totally in isolation.

A broad range of factors influence the preparation of young people for life after school and the support that they need. Many of these apply to young people in general, though for young people with disabilities, the need for support may be magnified. It is generally accepted that all young people can experience difficulties in facing the challenge of moving to post-school environments. However, while young people with disabilities face similar challenges, it is evident that the nature and extent of these challenges are complicated by a number of factors unique to young people with disabilities. These include, for example, ensuring continuity and appropriateness of support in post school environments, accessing reasonable accommodations and addressing transport requirements, for example, supporting young people to use public transport independently.

1.3 Research methodology

Research was conducted to gather the views of relevant parties regarding how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after school. This included:

- **School visits** -we conducted one day visits to 10 schools (8 post-primary and 2 special). Across the 10 visits, we interviewed 10 principals and 18 other relevant staff ; conducted focus groups with 31 SNAs and completed telephone interviews with 19 parents of young people with disabilities
- **Key informant interviews** - we consulted almost 50 individuals including 11 representatives of adult day services; 12 from the Further Education sector; 24 from the Higher Education sector and 2 representatives of employers
- **Focus groups with young people with disabilities** - we consulted 35 young people with disabilities who have recently left school and received support under the SNA scheme during the Senior Cycle in school. The 35 young people with disabilities included 20 in adult day services, 8 in Further Education, 3 in Higher Education and 4 in employment. We consulted them through 8 focus groups and 3 telephone interviews
- **Development of case studies:** as part of the consultation process, we sought examples of potential case studies. The themes and key information

to seek for case studies were agreed with the National Disability Authority and cover a range of pathways after school.

1.4 Emerging findings from this study

The sample for this small-scale qualitative study was designed in order to gather information from a variety of post-school settings, from all major stakeholders in the school setting, and from a variety of schools settings, that is special schools and mainstream. As is typical with a qualitative research approach, the overall sample size is smaller than a quantitative survey and the findings presented should be interpreted in this light. Nevertheless, a number of points emerged clearly from the focus groups and interviews, which are set out below. These were the views expressed by those interviewed in response to a series of agreed discussion guides.

An **overarching finding** throughout the research is that many stakeholders – particularly those in post-school settings – find it difficult to accurately distinguish the role of the SNA from the supporting role of other staff within the school setting, e.g. resource teachers, classroom teachers etc. This was also sometimes apparent in the interviews with young people with disabilities and with their parents. When considering how well the young people in question were prepared for life after school, many of those interviewed considered the school supports in aggregate. This means that sometimes the perceptions of the SNA role are discussed within the context of the wider support framework. A fundamental lack of understanding of the role of the SNA in post school settings and an inconsistent approach to the use of the SNA resource within schools means that drawing conclusions in relation to adequacy and effectiveness is also complex.

1.4.1 Adequacy and appropriateness of support provided by schools in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school.

This section considers the adequacy and appropriateness of support provided by SNAs. However, it is recognised that the SNA support forms an integral part of the overall support network within schools and therefore it is not always possible for the various strands of support to be separated.

There is some variation in the nature of support and skills required for the transition from school to further education, training, employment or adult day services. This can vary according to the nature of disability, the capacity of the young person and the preparation they require according to their post school destination.

There was considerable divergence among the key stakeholders, in their views and expectations, about the adequacy and appropriateness of the support provided by schools in preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. Generally, staff in post school environments believed that young people with disabilities were not adequately prepared for life in their post school environments. To a certain extent, this belief was shared by some young people with disabilities and some parents of young people with disabilities. School staff, not

surprisingly, did not concur with this view. Many school staff felt that, given the resources and capacity within schools, much was done to help prepare young people with disabilities for life after school. Some staff provided examples of how young people with disabilities were given a range of supports to enable a successful transition to a post school environment.

It was generally considered by most participants, that supports needed to be very carefully tailored to address the needs of the young people with disabilities and the requirements and challenges posed by the post school environment. Particular examples based on the views of stakeholders of what is needed in terms of preparedness for life after school are detailed in the report. It became very evident that the adequacy and appropriateness of preparation is judged in how well and how quickly the young person with a disability could adapt to the demands posed by the post school environment. For example, how young people with a disability are expected to perform in a Higher or Further Education setting is radically different to expectations within the adult day services.

1.4.2 Types of support provided by SNAs and contribution to preparation for life after school

As well as considering how well prepared young people with disabilities are for life after school in general, this study specifically examined the types of support provided by SNAs to young people with disabilities in the later stages of their school career and what contribution, if any, SNAs made to the preparation of these young people for life in post school environments. There were widely divergent views among the key stakeholders about the adequacy and appropriateness of SNA support in general, and in particular, in relation to preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments.

Young people with disabilities were generally positive about the support provided by SNAs to enable them participate in education though they did not believe that the SNAs had played an active part in their preparation for life after school. The young people acknowledged that SNAs had provided valuable support for engaging in learning tasks, developing communication skills and increasing their confidence. Parents of young people with disabilities were divided on whether SNA support had a positive or negative effect in preparing these young people for life in post school environments. The majority of parents believed that SNA support had a positive effect and pointed to how SNAs had encouraged achievement among the young people with disabilities. A minority of parents believed that the young people had become overly dependent on the SNA support and, as a result, were not adequately equipped for life in post school environments.

Adult day service providers shared similar views. They believed that an unhealthy dependency had emerged that resulted in the inability of young people with disabilities to perform basic tasks independently. Further and Higher Education providers believed that SNA supports principally addressed the needs of young

people with disabilities whilst in school and had little relevance in preparing them for participation in Further or Higher Education. It was pointed out that over dependency on SNA support could result in a failure by the young people with disabilities to adjust to post school environments where considerably less support was available. Employers, who did not have a detailed understanding of the role of the SNAs, felt that at present, SNAs did not have a specific part to play in preparing young people with disabilities for employment. However, employers felt that SNAs had the potential to play a significant role in preparing young people with disabilities for employment, if suitable support and capacity were provided to enable this. School staff tended to have a better understanding of the role of the SNA compared to other stakeholders. Given this, school staff, including SNAs, differed in their view in relation to the role the SNA played in preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. It was acknowledged that, while the main focus of SNA support was on facilitating learning for young people with disabilities, they also made a significant contribution to the development of life skills, confidence, social and communication skills among these young people. SNAs reported that they provided support beyond physical care needs and helped to meet the emotional and social needs of young people with disabilities. SNAs provided a number of examples of this type of support including helping the young people with disabilities with day-to-day living skills, organisational skills and stress management. In some cases, SNAs also carried out an informal pastoral care role and provided a level of emotional support.

The additional supports provided by SNAs in the area of life skills and other additional tasks, are perceived as voluntary and additional to their existing workload by a number of the stakeholders interviewed. The Department of Education and Skills Circular 0030/2014¹ sets out to clarify the respective roles of SNAs, Classroom Teacher and Resource Teacher, the role of medical and professional people, as well as, the support role of SNAs regarding various people with disabilities. A range of broader issues emerged during the interviews regarding the specific role of the SNA including:

- What is in the best interests of the young person, if the SNA is undertaking tasks that may encourage dependency?
- Whether the SNA is appropriately qualified to undertake additional tasks, including, for example, those which stray into teaching and learning?² These tasks are somewhat removed from the essence of the role which is about supporting individuals to participate in learning. Should the role of the SNA be expanded to encompass elements of teaching and learning and

¹ Circular to the Management Authorities of Primary Schools, Special Schools, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executive Officers of the Educational Training Boards- 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, Circular 0030/2014, Department of Education and Skills, Special Education Section, Athlone, County Westmeath.

² Some of the SNAs interviewed were qualified teachers.

associated training required, this would have significant implications for relationships with those who are qualified, or who regulate qualifications

- How is the SNA, in taking on additional tasks, such as, teaching and learning, fostering life skills, social and communication skills, informal pastoral care, supervision, etc., impacting on the effectiveness of resources within and outside the school?
- Whether resources are being used effectively? If an SNA is being used to carry out duties for which they are not recruited or are not in keeping with their role, is this best use of their time and what is the impact of this on the individual young person with a disability?

1.4.3 Experience relating to adult day services

Staff in adult day services reported that the young people were generally not prepared for life in this post school setting. They cited examples of young people lacking basic life skills and the ability to socially interact with their peers. In particular, staff believed that the young people were overly dependent and lacking an ability to work independently. Young people with a disability in adult day services stated that they had not received sufficient practical support in school, including life skills, to prepare them for life in this post school environment.

Parents of young people with a disability, while, generally positive about school support, were divided about whether young people with a disability had sufficient life skills to make the transition to adult day centres. School staff including SNAs, on the other hand, demonstrated an awareness about the critical importance of developing life skills and provided examples of how this was achieved, although this type of work was perceived as not strictly within the remit of the SNA role. Some schools had a policy to reduce dependence on SNA support through reduction in explicit support and encouraging young people with disabilities to become more independent in everyday activities.

1.4.4 Experience relating to Further and Higher Education

Staff in Further and Higher Education settings believed that young people required specific supports to enable them to engage with the different challenges in a radically altered teaching and learning environment. Staff also were in agreement that there was a need for focussed career guidance to be provided in school. Young people with disabilities, who attended Further or Higher Education institutions, agreed that they required more specific one to one career guidance at an early stage of their school career, which they had not received. These young people relied heavily on support from family and friends in making course choices.

All informants acknowledged that young people with disabilities needed particular life skills to engage fully in the post school environment. The contrast in understanding

of the role of the SNA within school led to a divergence of opinion in relation to the impact of the SNA role on young people's preparedness for life after school. The majority of staff and some of the young people with disabilities believed that tailored SNA support did address some of these needs in preparing for life after school. However, there was a view among some school staff that the current Senior Cycle curriculum, was not best suited to addressing the need for life skills and social skills among some young people with disabilities. The exception to this is the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. However, it is not available in all schools.

1.4.5 Experience relating to employment

Young people with disabilities, who were in employment, felt they had been ready to leave school but experienced a difficult transition to the world of work in the absence of the support network available in school. These young people reported that the support of organisations outside of school, such as, employment facilitators, was a critical factor in facilitating the transition process. School support for specific life skills, such as independent travel, an essential requirement for employment, would have been valuable according to the young people with disabilities. Employers believed that young people with disabilities received too much support in the latter stages of school. This lessened their capacity to work independently and to socially interact with their work colleagues. Employers did acknowledge, however, that some of the issues encountered by young people with disabilities could be applicable to any new employee, such as, job fit/correct skill for the role.

1.4.6. Key issues in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school

The divergence in views among stakeholders about the adequacy of existing school supports in preparing young people with disabilities and, specifically, the SNA role in this process raises a number of key issues:

- School capacity to adequately address the complex requirements of preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments, in particular what role SNAs can play in the preparatory process, given the current designation of their role as per Circular 0030/2014. This is reinforced by the agreed view amongst the majority of stakeholders that this preparatory role is perceived as not within the SNA remit. In addition, the preparatory support that is currently provided by SNAs to young people with disabilities is limited by capacity and resources and therefore is not perceived to have a significant impact.
- Who should have overall responsibility for preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments?

Key stakeholders believed that the existing arrangements to support young people with disabilities to be prepared for life after school were inadequate. Stakeholders were pragmatic about the scope and capacity which schools had to provide these

additional supports, acknowledging that schools had to primarily concentrate on educational needs.

As noted already, key stakeholders struggled to differentiate between the role of the SNA and other supports within school. As a result of this, the entire support network within school was viewed poorly by key stakeholders who felt that the support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school was inadequate and inappropriate. Given this, the role played by SNAs in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school cannot be viewed in isolation to other critical factors which impact on an individual's level of readiness for life after school. This was highlighted in some of the views expressed during the research, for example, the need for access to suitably qualified Guidance Counsellors in post-primary and special schools³ to explore future options in post school environments.

It is also evident that while SNAs can contribute to the preparation process, responsibility for this is not solely within the remit of the SNAs. In some post primary school settings, SNAs did attempt to foster life skills and independence skills among young people with disabilities. Evidence indicates that this was not done uniformly by SNAs across schools. Despite this, many of those in post school environments could see little impact of the SNA support in preparing these young people for the challenges in their new setting.

The report has shown that, in many cases, SNAs do contribute to this preparation process. However, the additional support is not consistent or standardised across the SNA programme. A key finding from this report is the need to address these issues and attempt to form a consistent yet effective offering across SNA provision. This may be achieved through designating a wider role and remit for the SNA and thus one which is standardised. Alternatively, these supports or this preparatory work should be provided from another source within the system.

Some participants expressed a view that the current Senior Cycle curriculum, apart from Leaving Certificate Applied, and lack of resources could result in what may be considered an overly academic focus when a more practical course might have been more appropriate for some young people with disabilities. Bridging the gap between schools and post school settings is considered to be essential in fostering adequate preparation for movement to any new settings. However, there was limited evidence that a systematic approach to this issue was in place apart from outreach activities of Further and Higher Education institutions, some work experience programmes and the actions of some SNA's linking in with adult disability services. It is to be noted that many of the actions necessary to address this are already committed in the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities**⁴.

³ Special schools because they have been deemed primarily as National Schools(although some are now doing subjects beyond the National School curriculum) do not currently have Guidance Counsellors posts sanctioned by the Department of Education and Skills

⁴ Government of Ireland, 2015, **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with**

It is generally recognised that support from home is a critical factor in enabling a successful transition to post school settings for all young people but it is particularly crucial for young people with disabilities. While this factor was mentioned by key stakeholders, there was little evidence that these stakeholders had made conscious efforts to support input from home into this decision making process.

1.4.7. Areas for Further Consideration – school and system level

The primary focus of this research was on how prepared young people with disabilities are for life after school and the role played by SNAs in this regard. It is evident from this study, that ensuring adequate preparation for young people with disabilities in post school settings also requires action at both the level of the school and the wider educational system. Difficult questions remain to be addressed including what part, if any, SNAs should play in the preparation of young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. Circular 0030/2014 states:

A key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults insofar as this is possible. There is a need to balance the support provided in schools with each pupil's right to acquire personal independent living skills, the assistive SNA support which is given to them should always be at the minimum level required to meet the care needs of the pupil⁵

It could be argued, however, as some school staff have, that SNAs could play an expanded, more proactive role in the preparation process supporting the development of life skills, increasing capacity for carrying out tasks independently and fostering ability in social interaction with peers. This gives rise to a number of further issues for consideration with regard to policy and practice:

- Department of Education and Skills description of the role of SNAs in providing additional care needs and how to balance the support provided in schools with each pupils right to acquire personal independence skills could be clarified to ensure consistency of expectation and implementation and how SNAs actually could provide the social and emotional support and assist in developing relevant life skills
- SNAs may therefore require substantial continuing professional development to carry out their role effectively
- Bridging the gap between schools and post school settings requires attention, but this is already recognised in the actions committed to, in this

Disabilities.

⁵ Op. cit. Department of Education and Skills, Circular 0030/2014

regard, in the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities**⁶

- Each type of post school setting which formed part of this research, for example, higher education / adult day service required different skills and levels of preparedness for the individual to actively engage in such settings. Further consideration needs to be given as to how best to support the school system and SNAs in particular, in being able to best support the development of independent living skills and facilitating young people with disabilities to have meaningful interaction with other students

1.5 Issues for further investigation in future

1.5.1 The SNA scheme

The stakeholders interviewed identified a number of areas, based on their current understanding of the role of SNAs that might merit further consideration or discussion among relevant Government Departments and agencies. It may be helpful to note these here as reflective of the feedback of the various stakeholders included in the research.

1.5.1.1 Fostering a consistent understanding of the role of SNAs

There may be scope to review the job description and duties assigned to the SNAs to ensure they accurately reflect the role they can and, in some cases, already do fulfil in supporting young people with disabilities for life after school. This would be done in the wider context of encouraging greater independence for young people with disabilities.

To specifically help young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school, the description of the role could be better focused to ensure consistency of supports that assist with independence – for example:

- Greater role in preparation for transition to post school settings in the Senior Cycle. This would be likely to involve SNAs supporting young people with disabilities as they focus on life after school and developing the range of skills required for that
- Greater role and involvement in planning for movement to post-school settings. This would be under the direction of schools and adult day services in particular. It would take into account that there are already existing supports, such as Guidance Counsellors, Learning Support and Resource Teachers in place to assist with transition to other post school settings. This would involve the SNAs becoming more closely involved in

⁶ ibid

the development and delivery of individual tailored plans to support young people in progressing from school to adult day services

- Accompanying young people with disabilities on familiarization visits to colleges, adult day services, workplaces, etc., particularly in the case of SNAs in special schools

1.5.1.2 Training and Continuous Professional Development

It emerged from the research that it may be helpful to conduct a training needs analysis for SNAs to identify appropriate skills, qualifications and other Continuous Professional Development that may be required to deliver an effective support service, taking into account the other roles and system in which the SNA will operate. This could also take into account specific situations that SNAs may encounter in schools, for example: working with students who have medical conditions as well as disabilities that might require administration of medication, knowledge of how to perform first aid in an emergency situation and dealing with young people with behavioural/emotional difficulties.

Following this analysis, it might be feasible to consider development of a training plan to ensure that SNAs are provided with the training and development required to fulfil their role in a timely fashion and, also, to identify resources to support the delivery of the training plan.

1.5.1.3 The impact of school ethos

It emerged in the course of the research that the individual school ethos had a significant impact on how the SNA supports were deployed, and in turn, how this affected the part played by the SNA in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Examples include:

- Inclusive ethos
- Nurturing/supportive environment
- Holistic approach to supporting young people with disabilities
- Mutual respect and understanding of teaching and non-teaching roles
- SNAs as an integral part of the school support for young people with disabilities
- SNAs actively involved in personal and transition planning for the individual student

It may be worthwhile, in the course of any review of good practice, to capture and collate evidence of good practice in relation to school ethos and the impact, if any,

this has on SNAs and the support provided to young people with disabilities in schools. (This is linked to the point about sharing and promoting good practice in the next section).

1.5.2 SNA within the wider school support framework

1.5.2.1 Context

The SNA is just one element within a wider support framework available in school settings. As such, it is impossible to consider the role completely in isolation. This is further emphasised by the fact that the research demonstrated the extent to which many stakeholders found it very difficult to accurately disaggregate the supports provided by the SNA from those provided by others within the school setting. It may therefore be helpful to note some of the more broad-ranging issues that were raised in the course of the interviews, some of which are already committed for addressing under the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities** and others which may merit some further consideration. These are summarised below.

1.5.2.2 Transitions

It is noted the importance of transition planning is widely recognised and is being progressed through the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities**, in relation to access to further education, training and employment. It may be helpful to explore the need for transition planning to begin early in the post-primary school career of students with disabilities to adequately prepare them for life after school. This transition planning can be incorporated into a collaboratively developed IEP involving the young person, their family, resource teacher and Guidance Counsellor, and could also include the SNA where appropriate.

This research has identified in particular, views on a lack of preparedness for young people with disabilities who transition to adult day services in terms of life skills. Views and experiences refer to the value and benefits of work experience and support that is more practically focused. Whilst study participants consider that the Leaving Certificate Applied goes some way to address what is needed, it is not available in all schools. It may be helpful to consider possible mechanisms for enhancing life-skills training within the school setting, where appropriate and relevant. Reviewing the ways in which young people with disabilities currently transfer to adult day services may be helpful in identifying areas for future attention.

1.5.2.3 Preparation for Education, Training and Work

The various stakeholders interviewed underlined the importance of effective guidance counselling in helping to prepare young people with disabilities for life after school. This is an area for action already committed for development in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities. This support is important both in context of mainstream and special schools.

1.5.2.4 Understanding the support landscape

Given, the wider support context in place in school settings, including and beyond the individual role of the SNA, and in light of the fact that many stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of the parameters of each of the support roles, it may be helpful to carry out an exercise to map the areas of need (to prepare young people with disabilities for life after school) against the supports currently provided in school by SNAs and others (including, other school staff, Guidance Counsellors, home/family, etc.) and through the Senior Cycle curriculum.

Such a mapping exercise could take into account both in-school and post-school supports and the interaction between the spectrum of support needs required by young people, the various pathways that young people will follow and the specific demands of the post school environment. This would provide a useful framework setting out existing supports as well as clarity on roles and involvement in preparing young people for life after school, including in particular the role of the SNA in this regard. It would also identify gaps in support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school and inform any action plan to address same.

If such a mapping exercise were carried out, it would then be helpful to develop a plan to address the gaps in support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. This would take into account responsibilities for delivering the supports, identification of individuals/organisations who are suitably equipped to deliver the supports and resource implications (funding, staff, training, etc.). This is likely to include a range of agencies and stakeholders rather than be limited to the SNAs, as preparation for life after school is not solely the remit of the SNAs.

1.5.2.5 Sharing and promoting good practice

Where good practice is identified, in terms of preparing young people with disabilities for life after school, it would be helpful to consider ways of sharing and promoting this good practice as a means of building capacity within the system. Some of this could be about considering ways to improve linkages and communication both within schools, and between the schools and relevant post-school settings.

2 Introduction

2.1 Context for the research

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) have been requested by the Minister for Education and Skills to conduct a comprehensive review of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme. The NCSE has asked the National Disability Authority to contribute to this review by undertaking a qualitative study of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after they finish formal schooling. RSM PACEC have been commissioned by the National Disability Authority to carry out this research.

2.2 Terms of reference

The overall aim of this project is to conduct a small- scale qualitative study to ascertain:

(a) The views of young people with disabilities and personnel who have direct dealings with them— in further education/training/work sectors- on how prepared they believe students with disabilities are for life after school.

The qualitative study aims to capture the experience of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after they finish formal schooling. This includes transitioning into Higher and Further Education; training; adult day services and the world of work. It should focus on both the post-school supports they currently have/need in order to actively participate and engage in these key areas of life, as well as, the Special Needs Assistant supports they had in school and the adequacy of same, in enabling them to prepare for life after school.

(b) The views and experiences of school personnel (principals, teachers, Special Needs Assistants, parents) on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the Special Needs Assistant scheme in preparing young people with disabilities for the next stage of life after school.

2.3 Context for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school – roles

SNAs have a role in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school, however, it is important to recognise that this operates within a wider systemic context. This includes resourcing models; SNA role definitions; and transition pathways to post school environments. Therefore, SNAs do not have sole responsibility for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. In particular, within the school environment, various staff roles (see Table 2.1) provide a range of supports for young people with disabilities and these complement teaching and learning in schools. The supports seek to assist young people with disabilities on their journey through the education system, as well as, contribute to preparing them for life after school. Some of the main roles and associated supports are described in Table 2.1.

Table 1: Roles supporting young people with disabilities in school

Role	Summary
SNA	<p>SNA's are not qualified teachers and are not allocated to teach students or provide educational support.</p> <p>They cater for a minority of students with disabilities who have significant need for care support in an educational context and could not otherwise attend school.</p> <p>Usually, they support a number of students with care needs in a school.</p> <p>SNA's are allocated to school and work under the direction of the principal/teachers. This allocation may be made on a full or part-time basis, for example, an hour or more per day, and may be shared by named pupils for whom such support has been allocated.</p> <p>Their duties involve tasks of a non-teaching nature, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation and tidying up of classroom(s) in which the pupil(s) with special needs is/are being taught Assisting children to board and alight from school buses. Where necessary travel as escort on school buses may be required Special assistance as necessary for pupils with particular difficulties, for example, helping physically disabled pupils with typing or writing Assistance with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene Assisting on out-of-school visits, walks and similar activities Assisting the teachers in the supervision of pupils with special needs during assembly, recreational and dispersal periods Accompanying individuals or small groups who may have to be withdrawn temporarily from the classroom General assistance to the class teachers, under the direction of the principal, with duties of a non-teaching nature. (SNA's may not act either as substitute or temporary teachers. In no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class) <p>Where a SNA has been appointed to assist a school in catering for a specific pupil, duties should be modified to support the particular needs of the pupil concerned</p>

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Role	Summary
Resource Teacher	<p>Provides additional teaching capacity to schools for students with special educational needs. Responsibilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing and recording the child’s needs and progress Setting time-sensitive targets and agreeing these with teachers Direct teaching of children either within the classroom or separately Team teaching in instances where the children benefit Advising teachers with regards adapting the curriculum, teaching strategies etc. Meeting and advising parents where necessary Meetings with other health professionals relevant to the child’s interest, for example, speech therapists and psychologists
Guidance Counsellor	<p>Guidance Counsellors have a key role to play in supporting students with choices about their lives as follows:</p> <p>“The guidance and counselling process aims to help students to develop an awareness and acceptance of their talents and abilities; to explore possibilities and opportunities; to grow in independence and to take responsibility for themselves; to make informed choices for their lives and to follow through on those choices”⁷</p> <p>Recognising the holistic nature of the service and the integration of personal, social educational and vocational guidance counselling:</p> <p>“Counselling is a key part of the school guidance programme, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process and at moments of personal crisis. Counselling has as its objective the empowerment of students so that they can make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing. Counselling in schools may include personal counselling, career counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these”⁸</p>

⁷ **Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications for Section 9 (C)** cited in Institute of Guidance Counsellors Response to the Proposed Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers of Initial Education Programmes in Guidance Counselling April 2015.
<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Guidance-Counselling-Consultation/Submissions/Betty-McLaughlin-IGC.pdf>

⁸ **Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications for Section 9 (C)** cited in Institute of Guidance Counsellors Response to the Proposed Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers of Initial Education Programmes in Guidance Counselling April 2015.
<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Guidance-Counselling-Consultation/Submissions/Betty-McLaughlin-IGC.pdf>

Role	Summary
	<p>The role of the Guidance Counsellor is to engage in personal, educational, and vocational counselling with people throughout the lifespan, in the particular circumstances of their life.⁹ Areas of professional practice identified by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors include:</p> <p>The practice of personal education and vocational guidance throughout the lifespan: facilitating career, personal and educational choices over the client’s lifespan</p> <p>Labour market education and training: providing guidance on educational and training opportunities, and provide insight into the application process</p> <p>Counselling Skills: providing educational, vocational, and personal counselling advice</p>

Young people with disabilities in mainstream post-primary schools may be supported by Guidance Counsellors in the same way as all young people are. However, there is nothing specifically prescribed in the Guidance Counsellor role that describes how they should cater for the needs of this population. Further, it is worth noting that special schools, because they have been deemed primarily as National Schools, although, some are now doing subjects beyond the National School curriculum, do not currently have Guidance Counsellor posts sanctioned by the Department of Education and Skills. This clearly leaves some gaps in the provision of support for young people with disabilities in relation to the provision of Guidance Counselling.

Source: RSM PACEC

2.4 Research methodology

The following approach was taken to conducting this research and to gathering the views of relevant stakeholders regarding how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after school:

School visits

One day visits to 10 schools (8 post-primary and 2 special) were conducted. Across the 10 visits, 10 principals and 18 other relevant staff were interviewed and focus groups conducted with 31 SNAs and completed telephone interviews with 19 parents of young people with disabilities.

⁹<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:cQZxUtNHU1gJ:https://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/archivedcommittees/jobssocialprotectionandeducation/03.-The-Role-of-the-Guidance-Counsellor-docaug-07.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>

Key informant interviews

Almost 50 individuals were consulted including 11 representatives of adult day services; 12 from the Further Education sector; 24 from the Higher Education sector and 2 representatives of employers.

Focus groups with young people with disabilities

35 young people with disabilities were consulted who have recently left school and received support under the SNA scheme during the Senior Cycle in school. The 35 young people with disabilities included 20 in adult day services, 8 in Further Education, 3 in Higher Education and 4 in employment. They were consulted through 8 focus groups and 3 telephone interviews. Measures were taken to ensure that we effectively engaged with young people with disabilities in an accessible way and ensured their views were reflected appropriately. These included:

- Extensive contact with service providers in advance of focus groups in adult day centres and with stakeholders in Further Education, Higher Education and employer representative bodies who assisted in arrangements for focus groups and interviews with young people in these sectors. This sought to ensure that young people understood the purpose of the research, that practical arrangements, such as, day, time and location, were suitable and that the young people involved felt comfortable participating in the research
- The research team members who conducted the focus groups with young people with disabilities were specifically chosen based on their previous experience in conducting focus group research with this population
- At the beginning of each focus group, interviewers explained the purpose of research, what was expected from participants and emphasised that they were free to leave at any time
- In one case, the adult day service provided a staff member who was competent in Lámh, an Irish sign language developed for people with intellectual disabilities. This proved to be very helpful in clarifying any areas of difficulty for the participants

Development of case studies

As part of the consultation process, we sought examples of potential case studies. The themes for case studies and the key information to seek in these were agreed with the National Disability Authority and cover a range of pathways after school. Further information was gleaned from a brief follow up conversation with the participant and, subsequently, by phone and/or email. The case studies were then sent to the participants for feedback and validation before being included in the report.

2.5 Structure of the report and appendices

The structure of the remainder of this report is

Section 3 Focus groups with young people with disabilities

Section 4: Interviews with parents of young people with disabilities

Section 5: Key informant consultations

Section 6: School visits

Section 7: Analysis, conclusions and key issues

The report has separate Appendices with supporting information on

- Topic guides
- Schools visited including the staff consulted within these schools
- Key informants consulted
- Focus groups with young people with disabilities
- Characteristics of the target group

3 Focus groups with young people with disabilities

3.1 Introduction – focus groups

3.1.1 Introduction – focus groups and young people participating

This chapter presents the findings from a series of focus groups and phone interviews with young people with disabilities. The focus groups were drawn from young people with disabilities who transitioned from school into employment; Further/Higher Education or adult day services.

Full details of the focus groups are available in Appendix 4, page 29.

3.1.2 Overview

The key issues that emerged from the focus groups with young people with disabilities included:

- There was broad consensus from young people with disabilities that they did not consider themselves to be fully prepared for life after school. For many, they did not feel prepared to meet the challenges they faced after school, regardless of their current setting. In particular, learning new tasks, taking on new responsibilities, interacting and communicating with peers and colleagues, were key challenges identified by young people with a disability after leaving school, which they felt unprepared to meet
- Young people with disabilities described three broad support categories of support provided in school. This included:
 - **Learning support**, for example, supporting learning through note taking and providing extra support in explaining subject matter
 - **Emotional support**, for example, supporting young people with a disability if they feel anxious or nervous
 - **Practical support**, for example, getting around school, personal care needs and getting to and from school
- Young people with disabilities, who had undertaken work experience, indicated that this was particularly helpful in preparing them for life after school. It allowed them to learn new things and develop different skills. This was not available to all of the young people with disabilities and was, again, linked to the capacity and resources available within the school they attended
- Very few young people with disabilities could recall other support provided by the SNA. The majority often could not differentiate between the support provided in school more widely and that specifically provided by the SNA
- For most, the support provided by the SNA was closely linked to learning support, that is, taking notes, helping them with subject work, explaining subject

material to them

- The consensus of all the young people with disabilities was that they had not received sufficient practical support, including life skills support in post-primary school. More support would have been welcomed. Young people with disabilities also identified other supports, which would have helped prepare them for life after school. These included career guidance and social skills support
- The support provided to young people with disabilities after school varied widely. It depended on the setting and the nature and extent of the young person's disability

3.2 Preparedness for life after school – key findings

3.2.1 Introduction

Young people with disabilities were asked about their overall preparedness for life after school. The responses provided by the young people with disabilities are presented below, split into sections depending on their present occupation.

3.2.2 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in adult day services

Young people with disabilities in the adult day services found it difficult to provide a view on their level of preparedness for life after school.

Of those who expressed a view, some indicated that they felt ready to leave school as they knew everything they felt they needed to know at that point.

“There was nothing else I would have liked support with...I think I knew everything I needed to know at that point” (Young person with severe disabilities)

Young people with disabilities referred specifically to the work experience they had carried out as helping to prepare them for life after school. It allowed them to learn new things and develop different skills. One young person referred to having a work experience folder that contained details of what they had done / achieved.

“I did a week's work experience which helped me to learn new skills. It was good for me to learn about travelling to and from work and of being able to do things myself. I got a work experience folder to show my teacher what I had done” (Young person with autism)

Other young people with disabilities had mixed views about leaving the familiar school environment:

- Many of the young people with disabilities described being nervous about leaving school and going into the unknown. The lack of support available after leaving school, the lack of knowledge about where they were going and the thought of leaving friends that they had made in school all contributed to the feeling
- Some of the young people with disabilities stated that they did not wish to leave

school as it was an environment that they were familiar with. The thought of a new environment scared them

- Some of the young people with disabilities were glad to be leaving school as it had not been a positive experience for them. In particular, the young people with disabilities mentioned the bullying they had experienced and their inability to make friendships as the reasons they were glad to be leaving school. These young people with disabilities stated that they were ready to leave school

“I did not enjoy school. I was bullied a lot and it really hurt. I was glad to be leaving” (Young person with physical disability)

3.2.3 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education

Similar to those in adult day services, young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education also reported that they had mixed emotions when leaving post-primary school. Most felt they were prepared for their life after post-primary school and ready to ‘move on’ to the course of their choice. It was something new, representing a greater degree of freedom and they were ‘as ready as they could be’. However, they also felt it was a big adjustment and at least one young person described this as “a particularly anxious time” as they were moving to something different and often did not cope well with change.

3.2.4 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in employment

Young people with disabilities in **employment** broadly stated that they were prepared for life after school. All of those consulted stated that they were ready to leave school and were looking forward to life after school.

They described the transition from school to employment as “challenging” as the support network they had become accustomed to was no longer available. Some of the biggest challenges faced by young people with disabilities in employment included new tasks, travelling to and from employment and interacting with colleagues and customers. While these would be challenges for any young person progressing to employment, the magnitude of the challenges increased because of the nature and extent of the disability. For example, young people with Down Syndrome can take longer to become comfortable with new environments. Therefore, a long process of induction might be needed before they start in a new job. Some other young people with disabilities, for example, with autism may need additional support in getting to and from a new place of work and require an established routine before they can start to travel independently.

Young people with disabilities in employment agreed that school had prepared them to a certain degree for life after school. It was the support of organisations, such as, employment facilitators who helped with transition. Employment facilitators provide support to the young person after they finish school, particularly, in relation to job search.

“The employment facilitator has really helped me since leaving school. She helped me to develop my CV and is always looking for jobs that might be interesting for me. She has actually helped me get my job.”
(Young person with autism)

The types of support provided include:

- Job search activities
- Developing a CV
- Preparing for interviews
- Getting to and from work etc.

3.3 Supports young people with disabilities need / supports young people with disabilities get - key findings

3.3.1 Introduction

The young people with disabilities were asked about the support that they needed in school, in order to be prepared for life after school. They were also asked to describe the support they actually received and who provided this and whether it met their needs. In many instances, they found it difficult to separate the nuance of these two questions.

3.3.2 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in adult day services Supports that young people with disabilities need

The following are the views of some of the young people with disabilities who identified a number of supports they needed in school to help prepare for life after school, including:

- **Learning support** – nearly all of the young people with disabilities stated that they needed support with learning. In particular, they needed support with maths and English with many stating that they did not understand all of the content covered in class by the teacher. The type of support needed included note taking, help with project work and taking extra time with them to explain subject matter

“In school I mainly had help with my work because I found it really difficult. I didn’t have to do all the classes, however I got help with maths because I found it hard.” (Young person with moderate learning difficulties)

- **Emotional support** – many of the young people with disabilities stated that they required emotional support in school to deal with stress. This might arise in the lead up to exams or when events inside and outside of school had caused them stress
- **Practical support** – many of the young people with disabilities needed practical

support. This varied depending on the scale of their disabilities. Some needed support in getting around the school; others needed support in organising themselves; getting to and from school; eating lunch; personal care etc.

- **Information on the next stage / step** – some of the young people with disabilities highlighted that they would have liked more information on what the adult day services location they were going to was like. They would have welcomed the opportunity to make a number of regular visits during their final year in school and / or over the summer months. This would have allowed them to become more familiar with their new surroundings, the people who work in adult day services and the activities they might be doing

Supports that young people with disabilities get

Young people with disabilities in adult day services indicated that they did receive support, particularly from the SNA, in relation to their educational needs. Others stated that they received emotional and social support from their SNA.

The majority of those interviewed stated that they did not receive sufficient practical support, including life skills support, and would have welcomed more of this.

3.3.3 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education

Supports that young people with disabilities need

Young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education mostly referred to the day-to-day support they needed to complete everyday tasks. However, they also referred to the following supports that they needed:

- **Information or advice** - from those with a disability that had previously gone to Higher Education. It was felt that this would help them to put the situation in context
- **Career guidance** - specific to their disability. It was felt that the guidance available was geared toward aptitudes and did not take into account their specific needs or what they could / could not do
- **Social skills** - one young person indicated that they were not able to engage with their peers due to their disability and the time they had to spend in hospital. Therefore support to help engage with their peers was required

Supports that young people with disabilities get

When discussing the support they received in post-primary school to help prepare for life after school, young people with disabilities referred to the career guidance support. They received this at the same time as other young people in their year and, in one instance, the young person felt that they did not understand what they wanted to do or were capable of doing. They felt that they would have benefitted from more one-to-one and specific guidance in this area. It would have been useful to receive

this guidance sooner. It was mainly provided at the start of sixth year and, at a time, when 'everything came at once'.

When discussing support to help them plan and prepare for life after school, young people with disabilities mostly referred to the support provided by their family and friends. Support from these sources was the main influence on decisions about where to go after school.

One young person also referred to a range of accommodations that was put in place in post-primary school, for example, a laptop/screen reader, a braille embosser and braille copies of textbooks etc. However, when considering their progression to Higher Education, most young people with disabilities said that they found out the information they needed by themselves or with their parents, for example, by attending open days etc.

3.3.4 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in employment Supports that young people with disabilities need

These are the views of some young people with disabilities in employment who identified a number of supports that they needed to help prepare for life after school. Similar to young people with disabilities in other settings these largely focused upon:

- **Learning support**, that is, support with particular subjects
- **Social support**, that is, support with relationships and dealing with social situations
- **Life skills support**, that is organising themselves, being able to look after themselves

Supports that young people with disabilities get

Many of the young people with disabilities stated that they did receive support in school particularly in relation to learning support and social support. They indicated that teachers, Guidance Counsellors and SNAs all supported them in achieving their outcomes in school. Many of the young people with disabilities would have welcomed more support in relation to life skills, particularly in terms of independent transport and organisational skills, which would have helped them in their employment.

3.4 Supports provided by SNAs to young people with disabilities with disabilities-key findings

3.4.1 Introduction

The young people with disabilities were asked about the specific supports they received from the SNA in school. They were asked how this support prepared them for life after school, which supports provided by SNAs were deemed to be most effective, challenges faced by SNAs in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school, and any examples of good practice. However, most young people with

disabilities were not able to provide information on the latter issues of the challenges faced by their SNA or what they thought was effective SNA support.

3.4.2 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in adult day services

The young people with disabilities in adult day services struggled to separate the overall support they received in school with that specifically provided by the SNA. However, in recalling their SNAs, the majority described a positive relationship. When asked about the support the SNA provided, the following points were discussed:

- **Learning support** – almost all of the young people with disabilities related the support of the SNA to their learning in school. Many commented on the support the SNA provided with subjects and school work. In particular, the young people with disabilities stated that their SNA helped them to understand curriculum content which they missed in class or which they did not understand in class
- **Practical support** – some of the young people with disabilities stated that the SNA had supported them in practical ways. In many instances this related to getting to and from school and ensuring that they ate lunch, used the toilet when needed etc.
- **Friendship** – many of the young people with disabilities spoke warmly of their SNAs and indicated that many of them were friends who helped them in school

However, some of the young people with disabilities indicated that their SNA did not play a specific role in preparing them for their life after school. They reported that other supports or activities, for example, work experience had helped them with this.

3.4.3 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education

Young people with disabilities in Higher Education and Further Education mostly referred to how the SNA helped them with school. This mainly focused on:

- **Learning support** - young people with disabilities referred to how the SNA helped them to understand questions and ‘make sense of work in the classroom’
“I had a good experience with my SNA, they helped [me] in class with spelling etc. and they were always there for me” (Young person with an intellectual disability)
- **Confidence building** - young people with disabilities said that their SNA helped to build their confidence to progress to the next stage and that they had the abilities to cope with this
“I discussed my options with my SNA, they gave me confidence to make choices” (Young person with an intellectual disability)
- **Communication skills** - one young person indicated that they struggled to communicate well with other young people with disabilities and the SNA helped

them with pronouncing words etc.

- **Everyday tasks** - getting books out and putting them away after each class, for example, assisting at break times and with personal care; and/ or helping with making learning more accessible by helping to take down notes etc.
- **Independence** - one young person indicated that in 4th and 5th year their SNA encouraged them, where possible, to do more things for themselves in order to help prepare them to become more independent

“[I] received more support when I first started school and in all classes however this reduced over time” (Young person with an intellectual disability)

Overall, the young people with disabilities felt that the SNA they had in school was helpful and supportive. However, they were unable to specify what, if anything, they did that helped them to prepare for life after school. Their responses focused on the support they provided on a day-to-day basis to help them in school. While the young people with disabilities would discuss their plans with their SNA, the SNAs did not provide any specific input.

3.4.4 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in employment

Young people with disabilities in employment spoke positively about the support provided by the SNAs in school. They generally agreed that it did help them prepare for life after school. In particular, they agreed that the focus of the SNA support was in relation to their learning. Many of the young people with disabilities cited examples of how the SNA would help them with a subject that they struggled with. In many instances, the support was detailed as note taking, helping them understand difficult subject content and/or making notes simpler for them to understand. Many indicated that the SNA did contribute to them achieving their educational outcomes.

“The SNA helped me with my school work. I really struggled with maths and the SNA was always there to help me with classwork or to help with things I didn’t understand” (Young person with moderate learning difficulties)

“The SNA had a major impact on my school work. I wouldn’t have got through school without her” (Young person with learning disability)

Few of the young people with disabilities could recall any additional support that the SNA provided. However, those that could, stated that the SNA helped them with getting to and from class, making sure they had the right books etc. and helping them when they were stressed or anxious.

Table 2: Case study 1: Midlands adult day services, Down Syndrome

Case Study 1: Midlands Adult Day Services, Down Syndrome

This case study focuses on a young female, aged 22 years living in the Midlands. She has Down Syndrome with additional complications in relation to physical mobility. She attended a mainstream post-primary school up to the end of third year after the Junior Certificate exams. Following that, she moved to special school, staying there until she was 19. She then gained a place in a local adult day service which she still attends.

Having experienced a mainstream post-primary school and a special school, this young person and her parent were able to contrast the ethos, approach and role of SNA in them. They also commented on the impact these differing approaches had on the young person with disabilities.

In the mainstream post-primary school, the SNA role was not felt to be well understood. Both the parent and the young person felt there was a lack of integration into the school. This had a significant impact on the young person's experience in post-primary school and her ability to deal with social interactions. The perception was that the ethos and the approach was to use the SNA to ensure that the young person with disabilities did not disrupt the learning of any of the other students, rather than, focus on supporting the young person with disabilities. The support provided to the young person was described as intensive one-to-one support. The SNA focused on an intensive programme of support for the young person. This included basic actions, for example, taking her coat off, lifting her pencil case out of her school bag etc. which she should have been encouraged to do by herself. The parent indicated that the intensive nature of the support was not healthy for her daughter. This encouraged dependency on the SNA rather than the SNA trying to encourage the young person to do things by themselves.

The ethos and approach of the special school in relation to the SNA was completely different from the mainstream post-primary school. It had a significant and positive impact on preparing the young person with disabilities for life after school. In particular, the integrated approach of the support in the special school and the focus on life skills were cited by her parent, as being key to preparing her for life after school. The role of the SNA, in the special school, was more targeted at developing independent behaviour, building confidence and developing life skills. In particular, the young person understood better the nature of the support of the SNA in special school and was able to indicate the type of practical support that was offered.

“The SNA helped me to go to the shops, they taught me to get the correct change and how to get the bus” (Young person with Down Syndrome)

Case Study 1: Midlands Adult Day Services, Down Syndrome

Since leaving school, the young person with disabilities has been attending an adult day service in the local town. It offers a diverse programme of activities, which she participates in on a weekly basis. She finds activities related to cooking, looking after a household, diet and eating healthily as well as exercise classes and arts classes to be very useful in enabling her to live relatively independently. The young person is also very proud of her current job placement of two days per week in a gift shop. She described key tasks and responsibilities as involving helping customers to select the right gift. She was also being taught how to wrap the gift purchases. She hoped her job would become a paid placement in the future.

A critical factor in preparing this young person for life after school was the role of the SNA. It was acknowledged that, in both types of school, the SNA did provide support to the young person with disabilities above the core requirements as set out in their role. The role of the SNA in the special school was completely different with a focus on encouraging the young person to do things by herself, to challenge them to do new things without support and when applicable to take them out to town / shops / on the bus to encourage independence and confidence. The parent's view was that had her daughter remained in a mainstream school, she would not have been prepared for life after school. Whilst, it was acknowledged that there were still challenges for the young person in the transition from special school to adult day services, there was much less upheaval.

3.5 Supports provided to young people with disabilities after school – key findings

3.5.1 Introduction

The young people with disabilities were asked about the support they were provided with, both between leaving school and now in their current occupation. They were also invited to compare these with the supports provided in school, in order to consider if these were complementary.

Young people with disabilities did not have a wide knowledge of how supports provided in school were complementary to other support provided after school so there is limited information to report on this issue. The young people with disabilities, generally, did not refer to any supports that were provided between leaving school and their current occupation.

3.5.2 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in adult day services

The level and nature of the support provided to young people with disabilities in adult day services was tailored to their needs. As a result, there was a range of support activities discussed. These are detailed below.

- **Life skills support** – the majority of the young people with disabilities in adult day services described very practical supports. In many instances they were

participating in cooking course, courses related to managing money, courses related to dealing with housekeeping, community skills courses, healthy lifestyle and diet courses etc.

- **Work experience support** – many of those in adult day services were undertaking work based placements in the local area. These placements were supported by the staff. However, in many instances the young people with disabilities, when safe to do so, were responsible for getting to their work placement and carrying out their tasks independently
- **Social supports** – almost all of the young people with disabilities discussed the social support provided in adult day services. This included fostering the ability to make friends, to learn how to communicate and deal with different social situations
- **Additional educational support** – some of the young people with disabilities, in adult day services, were provided with additional educational support. This included traditional areas, such as, literacy and numeracy but often was broader, for example, including computers, electronic devices, arts and creative skills, reception skills, horticulture, gardening etc.

A number of young people with disabilities highlighted that the support they are receiving in adult day services differed from that provided in post-primary school, as they now had to do some things for themselves. However, this varied depending on the needs of the young person as some still required one-to-one support. In addition, it was suggested that support or work in school focused on 'table top' activities, that is, activities undertaken at their desks, for example, academic work or arts and crafts, whereas, in adult day services, activities are more practical and 'out and about'. Young people with disabilities also noted that they now had more opportunities to socialise with friends / those in their class.

3.5.3 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education

Young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education in expressing their views mainly referred to being supported by a personal assistant to help them in class to take down notes and to understand what is needed for some of their assignments etc. Specifically, in Higher Education, one student stated that they now received support 24 hours a day as needed. This was different to the support previously provided as while the SNA provided support in school their parents were able to provide help at home with cooking, washing etc. As they were now living on campus, a personal assistant (PA) also provided them with support at night.

Other support referred to was from teachers who provided extra support with learning, as well as, informal support from friends and other students and a separate room and/or reader provided for examinations.

There were mixed views on how helpful Guidance Counsellors in their schools were. While some young people with disabilities stated they did have an input, others highlighted that:

“The Guidance Counsellor did not understand what [I] wanted to do and was hard to talk to” (Young person with autism in Higher Education)

As a result, they were not helpful with their career choices.

“Guidance Counsellors need to take into account what people with a disability can do and provide advice to reflect this...the advice provided is too general” (Young person with a physical disability in Higher Education)

3.5.4 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in employment

Young people with disabilities in employment stated that there was very limited support available once they left school before they found employment. Some described the support of employment facilitators in helping them to find paid employment. Some of the supports described, included, developing a CV, completing application forms, preparing for and attending interviews and, once they gained employment, support with organising their travel and finances.

The young people with disabilities agreed that these supports were very different to those received in school and were focused upon their current occupation. Many indicated that they could not have got a job or maintained their employment had it not been for the additional support.

3.6 Reflecting on preparation for life after school and support provided in school – key findings

3.6.1 Introduction

The young people with disabilities were asked to reflect on the support they had in school and how that helped prepare them for life after school and in particular in their current occupation. This explores whether the young people with disabilities got the support they needed in school, in particular, from the SNA and whether it helped them prepare for life and equipped them for what they are doing now. Some, but not all of the young people with disabilities were able to comment on these issues.

The research also sought to explore what could have been done differently (in particular by the SNA) and what impact this would have had on the young people with disabilities (in terms of what they are now doing) and on the level of support being provided to them now. However, young people with disabilities did not comment on what could have been done differently and the impact of any differences on their personal outcomes in life.

3.6.2 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in adult day services

The young people with disabilities in adult day services did not provide detailed information on their readiness for life after school. They did recall the SNA, and

often associated the support provided with learning support, rather than, support in preparing them for life after school.

Those who commented stated that they did receive support in school although struggled to state whether the support provided was sufficient. Other feedback included:

- Many of the young people with disabilities had positive experiences with the SNA and had strong relationships and even friendships with the SNAs that they worked with. The young people with disabilities did feel that the SNA supported them. However, in almost all instances, the young people with disabilities associated the support with their learning rather than other areas of support
- Some of the young people with disabilities stated that more could have been done with the SNA to help them prepare for the next stage after school. Many stated that they were nervous or scared about leaving school and more could have been done to help them through this. In particular some suggested that more information was needed to help them understand better what environment they were going to and how this would be good for them

“I was scared because I didn’t know anything about where I was going when I left school. There was no information. More information on where I was going would have helped me” (Young person with severe learning difficulties)

3.6.3 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in Further Education and Higher Education

Some young people with disabilities in Higher Education believed that they got the physical support they needed, where required. However, some young people with disabilities in both Further and Higher Education felt that they would have benefitted from more specific career guidance at an early stage to help them plan for ‘what to do next’. Young people with disabilities in Higher Education would have liked more support to develop social skills. However, most young people with disabilities in Further Education did not refer to any support to develop living or social skills and did not highlight this as an area they would have liked more help with. Young people with disabilities in both Further and Higher Education did not believe their SNA had a particular role in helping to support them to prepare for life after school.

3.6.4 Perspectives of young people with disabilities in employment

Reflecting on the support they received in school, young people with disabilities in employment were broadly positive about the level and type of support provided. In many instances, they could not recall the specific support provided by the SNA to help them prepare for life after school. Looking at what could have been done differently, the young people with disabilities stated that more support in preparing them for employment would have been welcomed. However, they were unsure as to how this could be incorporated into the school programme.

3.7 Summary

The evidence from young people with disabilities indicates that, generally, they are not prepared for life after school. However, within this there is a range of opinion in relation to the level of preparedness. Whilst the level of preparedness is fundamentally linked to the nature and scope of the disability and the capacity of the young person, it often varied, depending on the destination and expectations of the young people with disabilities in this new environment. For those in Higher or Further Education, there was a consensus that whilst they felt prepared to an extent and could carry out everyday tasks for example, travelling to and from college or organising their work, they did not feel prepared to take on unsupported learning, that is, lectures, and taking dictated notes etc. For others, namely those participating in adult day services, it was clear that they were not well prepared for life after school and that they struggled to adapt and settle in their new destination. This was due in part to the co-dependent relationships they had established in the post-primary school, which had a detrimental impact on their levels of confidence and independence. This raises fundamental issues about the role of the school in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Consideration must be given to whether the role of the post-primary school is about education or preparing young people for life after school or both. If the school has responsibility for preparing young people for life after school, is it clear who within the school is responsible for this and what support they are expected to provide? The wider system in which the post-primary schools exists also needs to be taken into account in considering where/with whom responsibility lies for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school.

There was evidence of a range of support being provided in schools. Young people with disabilities described three broad support categories of support provided in school. This included:

- **Learning support**, for example, supporting learning through note taking and providing extra support in explaining subject matter
- **Emotional support**, for example, supporting young people with a disability if they feel anxious or nervous
- **Practical support**, for example, getting around school, personal care needs and getting to and from school

Clearly, there is a broad range of support provided. However, even with these supports, young people with disabilities do not feel prepared for life after school. A comparison of the support provided against the supports that young people with disabilities need in order to feel prepared for life after school may be required. This could identify where there is a good fit and where there are gaps.

Young people with disabilities who had undertaken work experience or a work placement as part of the Transition Year in post-primary school, indicated that this was particularly helpful in preparing them for life after school. This suggests that more practically based support tends to be more beneficial than classroom or school

based support. However, it is recognised that this needs to be balanced with the capacity and resources of the school.

Interestingly, the majority of young people with disabilities could not differentiate between the support provided in school more widely and that specifically provided by the SNA. This raises questions about the role of the SNA and how widely known and understood that is by pupils in post-primary school.

For those young people who could recall the support provided by the SNA, this was closely linked to learning support, that is, taking notes, helping them with subject work, explaining subject material to them. It appears that for many, the SNA role went beyond the health and safety and care needs as prescribed in the official job description. There are clear differences in how the role of the SNA is delivered in practice across schools. There is also evidence to suggest that, compared to the relatively narrow job description, the role has changed and expanded within schools. These findings point to a wide variation in how close to their job description they operate, a lack of consistency in how SNA's are deployed in schools, a lack of uniformity in the nature and type of support they provide.

In relation to the effectiveness of SNA, the case study in this chapter identified a key issue regarding the level of integration of the SNA resource in the school. This ranged from SNA resources being quite isolated to those that were more fully integrated. The former situation might be for example only one SNA in the school who did not participate in planning for the children they work with etc. More integrated supports are evident where the school had a SNA team, led by a SEN co-ordinator, and SNAs participated fully in school life. In schools where the SNA resource was more fully integrated, it was perceived to have greater ability to make a positive contribution to a young person with disabilities. In contrast, there was a perception that in schools where the SNA resource was isolated, the resource was much less effective in supporting young people with a disability. This raises "whole school" questions about how SNA are treated and integrated into the school. There is perhaps a need for a more formal steer from the Department of Education in relation to how the SNA resource should be used and how it integrates with other parts of the school resource.

A further interesting point arises in considering what effective SNA support looks like in relation to encouraging independence for young people with a disability. In some instances, this was structured and planned, in that, at the beginning of Senior Cycle in 4th and 5th year a decision was taken to begin the staged withdrawal of SNA support to encourage more independence. In other instances, this was more ad hoc and relied on the SNA's experience to encourage the young person with a disability to take on more activities themselves. The young people indicated that this was welcome in encouraging and supporting them to become more independent. This challenges the current approach to SNA support within post-primary schools and perhaps calls for a more formalised policy in relation to the staged withdrawal of SNA support in some instances.

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In the post school environment, the level of support provided to young people with a disability was diverse and depended largely on the destination and their support needs. Understandably, those with greater academic potential, that is, those in Higher Education and Further Education, reported the fewest support needs. For those who did need support, this was largely focused on supporting learning, for example, providing assistive technologies, separation for exams, that is, being allowed to sit exam in a separate room to other students. Young people with disabilities now in employment agreed that school had prepared them to a certain degree for life after school but, that organisations, such as, employment facilitators provided the majority of the support in relation to transition. Those who described the support provided by employment facilitators after they had left school, stated that this was largely focused upon travel arrangements to and from a place of employment and CV development. The specific support provided to young people with a disability who are now in adult day services varied. In general terms, it was largely focused on life skills supports, for example, teaching young people with disabilities about cooking, homecare, managing money etc. and social supports, for example, learning how to communicate with people in various social situations. Overall, this raises questions about where responsibility for supporting young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school lies (before and after school). It also raises issues about the availability and consistency of the support provided across the system and the approach to support across the various settings.

4 Interviews with parents of young people with disabilities

4.1 Introduction – parents of young people with disabilities interviewed

This chapter presents the findings from a series of interviews with parents of young people with disabilities. The characteristics of the sons and daughters of those interviewed covered a range of categories of disabilities as well as destinations post school.

Full details of the interviews are available in Appendix 2, page 19.

4.2 Overview

The key issues for parents of young people with disabilities are outlined below.

- Parents' views on how well prepared their son or daughter with disabilities was for life after school were linked strongly to the destination after leaving school. Views were also linked to whether their son or daughter with a disability had attended a mainstream post-primary school or special school
- They had differing views on the supports that their son or daughter needed at school. Factors influencing this include the ethos of the school and the size and level of integration of the SENCO¹⁰ and the SNA teams
- There was common agreement among parents that SNAs did support their son or daughter with a disability whilst at school. Opinions varied on whether the support provided by the SNA had a positive or negative impact on their son or daughter's level of preparedness for life after school. Amongst some parents, particularly of young people with a more profound disability and who were now in adult day services, there was a more negative view of the support provided by SNAs. In these instances, the parents' perception was that SNAs, particularly those in mainstream schools, prevented their son or daughter from carrying out simple tasks
- They did not have a working knowledge of the specific role or remit of the SNA in many instances
- They highlighted the following supports were provided in schools
 - **One to one discussions** – the school worked with their daughters or sons to discuss their goals, targets and options for leaving school
 - **Site visits** –the school facilitated site visits to Higher Education/Further

¹⁰ In this instance the SENCO or Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator is responsible for: the day to day operation of the school's SEN policy. <http://scotens.org/the-role-of-the-special-educational-needs-co-ordinator-senco/>

Education campuses to allow the young person to see where they could be going and this helped with the transition process and

- **Communication / social skills** –their daughters or sons were supported to communicate better with their peers
- **Independence / life skills** – their daughters or sons were supported to be more independent for example get a bus by themselves
- However, most were not able to specify if this support was provided by the SNA, other school staff or both
- The level of support required by and provided to young people with disabilities in the post school environment varied largely depending on the setting and their needs
- Parents of young people with disabilities indicated that there can be a lack of support after school. Many of the duties and responsibilities of care would fall back to the parents after SNA support ceased in post-primary school
- There was variation in the types of supports parents said their child with disabilities were provided within adult day services and training centres compared to Further Education and Higher Education
- In general, parents believed that schools provided all the support within their remit to young people with disabilities. It was widely agreed that this support was fundamental in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. However, it was agreed that other support, such as, mental health support and relationship support, could be provided in school which would better prepare young people with disabilities for life after school

4.3 Preparedness for life after school – key findings

This section provides an overview of the views of parents and the feedback provided on whether and how well young people with a disability are prepared for life after school.

There were mixed views amongst parents of young people with disabilities about how well their daughters or sons were prepared for life after school. Some parents of young people with disabilities felt their daughter or son already possessed strong life and social skills¹¹.

One parent highlighted:

“[she] was prepared well in advance...she was provided with good support from the SNA to help build her confidence as well time management and travelling by herself” (Parent of young person with mild autism and a mild learning disability)

¹¹ For example: resolving conflicts, learning how to begin and end conversations, determining appropriate topics for conversation, interacting with authority figures etc.

Others, primarily those whose son or daughter had a learning disability, felt their daughter or son struggled on leaving school. They felt that they required training, usually provided for by adult day services and rehabilitative training providers.

“There needs to be a link between school and the next level to help promote their independence and support their specific needs” (Parent of young person with autism)

Overall, how parents of young people with disabilities felt about how prepared their son or daughter was for life after school varied depending on the nature of their daughter’s/son’s disability. Some parents of young people with disabilities indicated that son/daughter was ready for the next step, others felt that they did not have the ‘coping skills’ needed. This included being able to flexible or handle changing circumstances are often present in the workplace.

4.4 Supports young people with disabilities need/supports young people with disabilities get to prepare for life after school – key findings

Parents of young people with disabilities believed that their daughters and sons received the support they needed while in school and, in most cases, were ready to leave school. They highlighted the following supports:

- **One to one discussions** – the school worked with their daughters or sons to discuss their goals, targets and options for leaving school
- **Site visits** –the school facilitated site visits to Higher Education / Further Education campus to allow the young person to see where they could be going and this helped with the transition process
- **Communication / social skills** –their daughters or sons were supported to communicate better with their peers
- **Independence / life skills** – their daughters or sons were supported to be more independent for example get a bus by themselves

However, most were not able to specify if this support was provided by the SNA, other school staff or both.

The support that parents of young people with disabilities felt their son / daughter needed in school varied according to the nature of their disability. Some indicated that their daughter/son needed support with physical needs, for example, personal care and others referred to confidence building supports. Overall, the parents of young people with disabilities felt that their son / daughter received the support they needed in school and indicated nothing additional was required.

However, parents of young people with disabilities did suggest that greater communication between the school and the next destination would be beneficial. Providing information on the support the young person with disabilities had at post-

primary school to facilitate transition and integration at the next stage would be useful.

4.5 Supports provided by SNAs to pupils with disabilities – including effectiveness – key findings

All parents of young people with disabilities stated that the SNA provided support to their daughter or son to help with care and behavioural needs, as well as, helping them to become more independent and encouraging them to achieve academically, socially and emotionally.

“The SNA helped my son to focus in class and boosted their confidence to move on” (Parent of young person with multiple disabilities)

In some cases, they also felt that the SNA helped their daughter or son to prepare mentally for the transition to Higher Education/Further Education, training or employment. They did this by discussing it with them, role playing some of the new situations or challenges they would encounter and trying to answer any questions they might have and may not wish to ask a teacher or parent. One parent specifically noted that their son

“would not be where he is today without the SNA support” (Parent of young person with multiple disabilities)

Another parent stated that

“The SNA was like a “second mother” that their daughter “could go to if they needed reassurance or felt unsure about their next step” (Parent of young person with mild autism and a mild learning disability)

Parents felt that the SNA was a benefit to their son or daughter at this stage as

“They were good at seeing the challenges that [their daughter] would have going into a ‘real world’ situation.” (Parent of young person with mild autism and a mild learning disability)

A small number of these parents noted that the SNA was a point of contact for them to find out how their daughter or son was coping and if they were experiencing any difficulties that the parents may not be aware of otherwise.

Parents stated that the SNAs helped their son or daughter with care and behavioural needs and helped them to prepare mentally and emotionally to leave school. However, they were less clear on the specific support provided by the SNA as distinct from the support provided by the school.

Table 3: Case study 2 Dublin, Further Education, multiple disabilities

Case study 2 Dublin, Further Education, multiple disabilities

This case study focuses on a young female with mild autism, mild learning disability and Asperger syndrome. She attended a special school in an urban area, leaving school at 18 years of age. Before leaving school, she was nervous about leaving, going to a new environment and meeting new people. However, with support from the SNA, she made a successful transition. Now aged 20, she is completing a media studies course at a college of Further Education.

The SNA helped with this by providing reassurance and role play (for example, identifying what aspects of going to college she was fearful of, such as meeting new people, and role playing these situations). The SNA also sent a letter to her parents detailing areas that she may need help / asking for the parent's advice and also suggesting 'homework'. These were things that the student and parents could do at home to help prepare her for life after school.

According to her parent, their daughter felt ready to make the transition and was prepared for the new experiences or challenges she might encounter by the time she left school. The SNA played an important role in helping to address any concerns she had and to build her confidence before going to college, although this was outside the SNA's defined role. The SNA's close relationship with the young person also meant that they were able to discuss any doubts, help to remove these and also to encourage the young person. By communicating with her parents, the SNA also helped them to understand what they could do to help their daughter prepare for leaving school.

In the special school that this young person attended, the SNAs are viewed as being key to social development. They provide a supportive, pastoral care role within the school. They are the first point of contact for a young person, often acting as a contact point between the teacher and student. Although, staff noted that the defined roles of the teacher and the SNA can be a potential issue, staff felt that the teacher and the SNA work as a team. There is good partnership working and open communication.

4.6 Challenges faced by SNAs – key findings

In many cases, parents of young people with disabilities had limited knowledge of the challenges that SNAs faced in schools and could only provide anecdotal evidence. Some of the challenges they highlighted included:

- **Dealing with a range of issues** - the scale and scope of the SNA role was the biggest challenge they faced as they required SNAs to be very flexible. SNAs often work with a range of students who each have varying needs. Parents of young people with disabilities considered that working with a young person with, Down Syndrome in one class, for example, and then moving to work with a

young person with autism would be particularly challenging

- **Dealing with behavioural issues** - in some instances, SNAs had to deal with difficult situations in which a student has behavioural issues; this proved challenging particularly if the student has a tendency towards anger or violence

4.7 Life after school – current supports – key findings

Interviewees were asked to consider the supports available to young people with disabilities after they left school. This included all settings and destinations post school and this section draws out the variation in the supports available to young people with disabilities.

Support required

Parents of young people with disabilities were asked to indicate what support their daughters or sons required to actively participate in life after school. Their views varied considerably with each interviewee, depending on the needs of their daughters or sons. Some of the main supports discussed included:

- **Educational support** - parents of young people with disabilities indicated that in some instances where their daughters or sons had progressed to third level education there were additional educational support needs. This was related to the provision of scribes and readers during exams to help their daughters or sons complete the exam. In other instances, it was the provision of a separate space for working / exams when their daughters or sons had issues related to noise and/or being distracted easily. These supports are not unique to third level education and are available through the State Examination Commission. The parents indicated that not all young people with disabilities who required the support in second level education, actually received the support they needed
- **Assistive technology support** - parents of young people with disabilities indicated that their daughters or sons also needed assistive technology support in Higher Education and Further Education. The types of assistive technology supports included:
 - Abbreviation expanders
 - Alternative keyboards
 - Audio books and e-textbooks
 - Optical character recognition
 - Tablet computers
 - Screen readers
 - Talking calculators
- **Life skills support** - most parents stated that their son or daughter required support in relation to life skills including:
 - **Personal supports** - many of the parents of young people with disabilities indicated that their daughters or sons required personal support which may include assistance with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene. This

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may also include helping a pupil with their intimate care needs

- **Social supports** - many parents of young people with disabilities stated that social supports were also required after school, this included:
 - how to interact in social situations
 - carrying out simple social engagement, for example, in a shop
 - ensuring that you paid for goods and received the correct change etc.

One parent noted that after going to Further Education their daughter developed social anxiety and she no longer had her SNA that “knew her ways and how best to support her” (Parent of young person with mild autism and a mild learning disability)

- **Organisational support** - organisational support was still often required for example transport arrangements in getting from home to adult day service and home again, making sure that the young person had all the books, equipment and money that they needed for that day etc.

Support received

The majority of parents of young people with disabilities indicated that these supports were not always available to their daughters or sons after they left school. Many of the duties and responsibilities of care would fall back to the parents after SNA support ceased in post-primary school. However, in some settings, for example, adult day services, some of these supports would be provided for example:

- Academic support / learning support
- Communication support
- Exercise and encouragement to participate in team activities and
- Support and learning in relation to life skills, such as:
 - how to do household chores
 - how to travel independently
 - how to live independently
 - how to manage money
 - how to socialise with others etc.

It was acknowledged by the parents that these supports would not be offered to every young person after they left school and that it would depend on their level of independence and their destination after school.

In their view, the support required by young people with disabilities after leaving school was dependent on their abilities and the nature of their disabilities. In many instances parents of young people with disabilities stated that their son or daughter continued to require education, personal, social and organisational supports after school. In addition, many stated that they also needed support in relation to life skills

for example travelling independently, cookery, diet and healthy lifestyle support and interacting in everyday social situations for example at the bank or shops.

Reflecting on the supports provided to their sons or daughters in their current setting, many of those with a daughter or son in adult day services and training centres indicated a high level of continued support. This focused on life skills and personal / social supports. Parents of young people with disabilities in Higher Education / Further Education indicated that the level of support was reduced. This focused on educational support with very limited support for any of the other aspects of their lives, where they may need support, such as, participating fully in college life

4.8 Reflecting on preparation for life after school and support provided in school – key findings

Parents of young people with disabilities were invited to reflect on their daughter's or son's time in school, whether they believed the experience to be positive and whether they thought the school or SNAs could have done anything differently which would have benefited their son or daughter in preparing for life after school.

In general, parents believed that schools provided all the support within their remit to young people with disabilities. It was widely agreed that this support was fundamental in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Specifically, one parent highlighted that

“from day one there was good SNA support, as well as, support from teachers....this enabled my [son] to move on to third level”. (Parent of young person with Asperger's Syndrome)

Parents agreed that other support could be provided in school which would support preparation for life after school. This included:

- **Mental health support** - many parents stated that mental health issues commonly affected students with disabilities and that there was limited support in school for dealing with these. One example was a young person who had a physical disability and was a wheelchair user. In Senior Cycle, she became increasingly aware of her disability and the impact it would have on the rest of her life. She experienced mental health issues resulting in anxiety and depression. The SNAs in the school provided support for the young person. This support was not mental health support delivered by experienced trained professionals. As the state of her mental health was never formally diagnosed there was no professional support provided.
- **Relationship support** - parents recognised that both friendships and romantic relationships were a key part of growing up. Given the nature of the disabilities of some students, these areas of social interaction were sometimes more complicated. Parents would welcome the presence of, or access to, a relationship counsellor who could support the student in developing and processing feelings,

and in pursuing these relationships

A small number of the parents stated that they would appreciate more pragmatism in the curriculum for students with disabilities. There are a number of elements to this:

- **Choice of subjects** - in some instances, parents believed that the option to reduce the workload of students would support their learning and provide more time for practical lessons in life skills. Parents acknowledged that some schools did allow students with disabilities to, for example, not take Irish as an additional language. However, they believed there should be more scope to remove subjects from the curriculum
- **Aiming towards exams** - some parents felt that students with disabilities, particularly in mainstream, were pushed to complete their Junior Certificate and / or Leaving Certificate, even if, they did not have the capacity to complete them to an adequate standard that would be of benefit to them in later life. Instead some parents believed that students with disabilities would benefit further from working towards gaining other qualifications such as a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

Many of the parents interviewed praised the role of the SNA. A minority stated that the SNA did cause an unhealthy dependence, which did not support their daughters or sons in preparing for life after school. In many schools, SNAs are rotated between young people with disabilities both between and within the school year. In a small number of cases, an SNA would be assigned to one young person only and support them constantly in both primary and post-primary school. It was felt by some parents that this constant support meant that when their daughters or sons left school, they could not look after themselves properly and were not prepared for life afterschool. A minority of parents advocated for a system of rotation and tapered withdrawal of SNA, where appropriate, and in the best interests of the student. This could be done to support greater independence at the end of school.

Table 4: Case study 3 Dublin adult day service, autism and MLD - over dependency

Case study 3 Dublin adult day service, autism and MLD - over dependency

This case study focusses on a young male, aged 21 years with moderate autism, and moderate learning disability. Having attended a mainstream post-primary school in an urban area, until 18 years of age, he is now attending an adult day service.

Overall, he agreed that the school ethos and culture was one of broad support for people with disabilities. Intensive one-to-one support was provided to the young person in his mainstream post-primary school. Though rather than focussing on supporting the young person, there was the view that within the classroom the SNA was used to ensure that the young person with disabilities did not disrupt the learning of other students in the class. As there were only a small number of young people with disabilities in the school and a small number

Case study 3 Dublin adult day service, autism and MLD - over dependency

of SNAs, the young person with disabilities indicated that he didn't feel integrated into the classroom. The low level of integration had an impact on his post-primary school experiences and the ability to deal with social interactions. Having said this, the young person was supported in a practical way by the SNA in preparing for life after school. The SNA did accompany him to the adult day service each day for a week in the last term of Senior Cycle in order for him to become accustomed to the new environment.

Having conducted interviews with the staff at the adult day service there was a broadly negative view of the role of the SNA. The staff at the service felt that the SNA was responsible for the development of an unhealthy dependency in the young person with disabilities to the extent that the young person would not complete basic tasks, for example, taking their own coat off because the SNA had done this for him in school.

The staff at the service were clear that, generally, the young people with disabilities that came to them were not ready for life after school. It was acknowledged by the staff that the role of the school was primarily to educate the young person with disabilities and that it was unfair, perhaps, to expect school to do more to encourage and develop independence. However, in nearly all instances the young people with disabilities could not perform basic tasks in their new setting and more complex tasks, like going to the shops or travelling to and from the service each day were a real challenge because of this lack of independence. Because of the low level of preparedness for life after school, staff at the service had to take time to 'retrain' the young people with disabilities to enable them to be able to look after themselves. In some instances, this was a stressful process for both the young people with disabilities and their parents.

Many of the parents interviewed stated that their son or daughter had a positive experience overall in post-primary school, although it was challenging at times. Reflecting on their daughter's or son's time in school most parents stated that the level of support provided was good. They also felt there was scope for additional support to be offered. This would have helped their daughter or son be more ready for life after school. The additional support detailed included mental health support and relationship support. However, parents of young people with disabilities did not specify or were unsure who would be best placed to provide such support.

In addition, many of the parents of young people with disabilities interviewed agreed that less focus on academic achievement in exams, such as, Junior and Leaving Certificates and a more tailored academic route, such as, FETAC would have been beneficial. It was also acknowledged that there were not resources in schools at present to facilitate this.

4.9 Good practice – characteristics of effective SNA support – key findings

Parents of young people with disabilities highlighted a number of specific characteristics which led to effective SNA support. These were broadly in line with the views of school staff and SNAs (section 6.9 of this report) and included patience, discretion and empathy, team work, understanding of their role, understanding of the disabilities and abilities of the young person, flexibility, supporting independence and providing encouragement. An additional characteristic noted by parents of young people with disabilities was:

- **Empathy** - parents of young people with disabilities stated that the ability of SNAs to empathise with the students was the most important characteristic. SNAs had a crucial role in the development and support of the students that they worked with and their ability to care about them was considered to be important. Parents indicated that this caring role was both in terms of the physical and mental well-being but also in an education role in trying to support the student achieve their potential

“SNAs should get to know the young person and build the relationship to understand how best to support them.” (Parent of a young person with an intellectual disability)

4.10 Summary

The views of parents of young people with a disability were divided on their preparedness for life after school. This was in all instances linked strongly to the nature and extent of their daughter/son’s disability and their capacity. Young people with disabilities face many of the same challenges and opportunities as their peers. These are exacerbated in many cases due to the interaction between the nature and severity of their disability and the demands posed by complex post school environments.

Parents’ views also differed on the support their sons or daughters needed in school and the support that was provided. Parents indicated that the scope of the support provided was influenced by the ethos of the school, the SEN and SNA teams that were in the school and how integrated they were into the structures of the school. In schools with a positive ethos towards young people with a disability, the parents perceived much more support being provided. In schools with a strong SEN and SNA team, who were well integrated into the school, the parents’ perception was that the supports provided to their son or daughter were greater and tailored to individual needs, where possible. These findings raise questions about both the role of the SNA and the place of an SNA within the school structures. The evidence suggested that those with more integrated structures deliver better outcomes, in terms of support, for young people with disabilities. It may be that formal policy or guidance is required to provide more clarity on the integration of the SNA resource into existing school structures.

Parents were strongly divided on whether the support provided by the SNA was beneficial in preparing their child for life after school. In most instances, parents of a young person with a disability, who was now in Higher Education, Further Education or in employment, had a broadly positive view of the support provided by the SNA. Many indicated that the SNA had supported their son or daughter with learning and, in particular, when they had struggled in class. This was highlighted as being particularly important in ensuring they achieved their academic potential and transitioned successfully to their new destination.

However, for some parents, particularly of young people with a more profound disability and who were now in adult day services, there was a more negative view of the support provided by SNAs. In these instances, the parents' perception was that SNAs, particularly those in mainstream schools, prevented their son or daughter from carrying out simple tasks. This was particularly evident, in the case study, with both the parent and the staff at the adult day service indicating that the SNA was responsible for the development of an unhealthy dependency. The extent of the dependency was evident in that the young person would not complete basic tasks, for example, taking his own coat off because the SNA had done this for him in school. Parents agreed that this intensive support was detrimental to the young person's ability to develop independence, an essential skill for life after school.

These issues point to the need to examine the role and remit of the SNA and also the wider system of support for young people with a disability. The Department of Education and Skills states:

It is important that the presence of the SNA support does not create over dependency, act as a barrier or intermediary between the class teacher or contribute to the social isolation of students.....the provision of too much SNA support ...can act as a barrier to a child achieving independent living skills....¹²

It is clear, however, that in some post-primary schools the intensity of the SNA support was perceived as having a negative impact on the young person with disabilities. This in turn meant that they were fundamentally not prepared for life after school as they had limited independence and confidence. There is perhaps needs for clearer guidance to be developed in relation to the role of the SNA focusing not only on what is within or out of scope of the role, but also considering the impact of the role and what effective support looks like.

Most parents did not have a working knowledge of the role of the SNA, therefore, they were limited in how much they could comment about the role. A small number of parents of young people with disabilities were able to surmise that the SNAs would face significant challenges each day due to the breadth and scope of their job, given the varied and differing needs of students they supported. This identifies a lack of knowledge and understanding amongst parents in relation to the role of the SNA

¹² Page 15, op. cit. Department of Education and Skills, Circular 0030/2014

in school. Importantly, it means that parents did not understand how the SNA was supporting their son or daughter with disabilities in school. There is a need to increase the information being provided to parents in relation to the role of the SNA in school.

There was a good level of awareness amongst parents of young people with disabilities about the level and diversity of support provided to young people with a disability in the post school environment. This varied largely according to the post school destination and the support needs of the young people with disabilities. In Higher Education or Further Education, support was largely focused on supporting learning (for example through provision of assistive technologies). For those in employment, support was more limited. It focused on practical support in relation to job searching, CV writing and other activities to support the young person to gain and maintain paid employment. For those in adult day services, support was largely focused on life skills supports, for example, teaching young people with disabilities about cooking, homecare, managing money etc. and social supports, for example, learning how to communicate with people in various social situations. These findings illustrate a wide variation and a lack of consistency in the support available to and provided to young people with disabilities after school. There is a need, perhaps, to establish minimum levels of support to be made available in each of the settings.

Reflecting on how prepared young people with a disability were for life after school, parents broadly felt that the post-primary school did everything required of them and within their remit and capacity. They did, however, indicate that there were specific additional supports, which they felt ought to be provided in schools, to support young people with a disability. These included, mental health support, relationship support and, in some cases, the phased withdrawal of the SNA, to allow for more independence to develop. The provision of additional support within post-primary schools is largely constrained by capacity and resources available. However, this evidence identifies alternative supports that young people with disabilities need in post-primary school. Consideration might also be given to whether the SNA has a role to play in the delivery of any of these additional supports and/or how these integrate with the currently defined role of the SNA.

5 Key informant consultations

5.1 Introduction – key informants

5.1.1 Key informants

This chapter presents the findings from a series of interviews with key informants. This involved almost 50 people in total and included representation from adult day services, Further Education, Higher Education and Employer bodies.

Full details of the interviews and focus groups are available in Appendix 3, beginning on page 26 of the Appendix.

5.1.2 Overview

The key issues that emerged from the interviews with key informants included:

- The majority of respondents across all settings felt that how prepared a young person is for life after school is multi-faceted. Factors included, but were not limited to, their background, category of disability, home environment and the type or level of previous support provided in post-primary school
- Often young people with a disability are not prepared for their next step as they had become dependent on a higher level of support provided in school, and, in many cases, by the SNA
- Key informants in their views outlined three categories of support that they believed young people with a disability need. These included supports to develop:
 - **Independent study/work skills**, for example, taking notes or how to plan assignments to meet a deadline
 - **Life skills**, for example, money management
 - **Social skills**, for example, ensuring that the young person (where appropriate) has time with peers to make friends and carry out typical social interactions
- Respondents from all settings felt these supports were not being delivered in post-primary schools at present. They felt that there should be a greater focus in post-primary schools on preparing young people for this next step
- Key informants had limited knowledge of the role of the SNA and, therefore, were not able to comment extensively on the support provided by SNAs in post-primary school. They did, however, believe that the role was focused on the 'here and now' in the school environment. It was not felt that the SNA currently had a

role in helping young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school

- The support that young people with disabilities receive at home can make a significant difference to how they cope with the transition to adult day services in particular
- Greater support is also required in the post-primary school setting to help young people to adapt to their new environment, for example,
 - Practical support, such as, orientation visits and support with basic computer literacy
 - Knowledge and awareness of how to access and use a wide range of assistive technology
 - Support to develop coping skills
- The provision of greater support in post-primary school to help young people with disabilities with study/work skills, life and social skills, could have an impact in a range of areas. It would better equip young people with disabilities for life after school. It would, however, have implications for resources in post-primary school and in post school settings. In some post school settings, resources are currently allocated to developing skills in young people with disabilities that might otherwise have been expected to have been in place on leaving school

5.2 Preparedness for life after school – key findings

5.2.2 Perspectives of adult day services staff

The views of the adult day service staff were mixed in relation to the overall preparedness of young people with disabilities for life after school, in adult day services. Many staff felt that young people with disabilities were not prepared for life after school and that schools had created a dependency which staff in the day service had to spend time undoing. The expectation of parents of young people with disabilities in relation to the support that would be provided was cited as one of the key challenges facing day service staff. Staff, in one of the five adult day services visited, were particularly critical of SNAs and the nature and intensity of the support. This was perceived as having a negative impact on the young people with disabilities, through a focus on their disabilities, rather than, on their abilities.

“The range of young people we get is very broad. It really very much depends on what post-primary school they have come from. Those who have had very intensive support really struggle in the first while in the adult day service because they expect that same level of support.”
(Adult day service staff member)

However, this view was not unanimous and some staff felt that young people with disabilities were mature enough to progress to day services after leaving post-primary school.

“In many instances, the young people have more abilities than disabilities, however that is not how they are treated in school.” (Adult day service staff member)

Staff were of the view that young people with disabilities and their parents would welcome more information on the services and supports provided (or not) in the day service. The availability, or lack of, transport was a key area in which information would be welcomed. It was felt that this would help alleviate some of the uncertainty around the transition. Key informants were not able to comment on who was best placed to provide this type of support.

5.2.3 Perspectives of Further Education informants

Key informants from the Further Education sector were not able to definitively say whether young people with disabilities who progressed to their sector were prepared or not. They did, however, highlight that how prepared young people with disabilities are, when they reach Further Education institutions, can vary. This depends on a number of factors including:

- The young person’s socio-economic background
- Their home environment including the education level of parents of young people with disabilities and the amount of support from home
- The category of disability and how long the young person has had the diagnosis, that is, if it was a late diagnosis or they had received early intervention
- The school they attended and the level of support provided there

It was also suggested, that as young people with disabilities reach the stage of progressing to Further Education, their needs may be changing. Young people with disabilities can face a range of challenges academically, socially and emotionally during this time. The process of transferring to Further Education can create a lot of anxiety, especially, for those with mental health difficulties and/or on the autism spectrum. One key informant suggested that

“it is less to do with need and more to do with confidence and resilience” (Principal of Further Education college)

Key informants described the main skills that young people with disabilities should be supported to develop to adequately prepare to progress to Further Education. In their view these included:

- Having a sense of resilience and self-confidence. Often the psychological aspects and/or mental health needs can be a significant barrier to progression. This is also true for those with a physical disability as providing a ‘gadget’, for example, equipment, assistive technology, etc, only helps to solve part of the problem. These young people with disabilities also require support in relation to resilience

and self-confidence

- Having the skills to make independent decisions
- Being able to articulate their needs and ask for the support they need. It was noted that young people with a disability are often slow to ask for support and, as a result, can fall behind or drop out

5.2.4 Perspectives of Higher Education informants

Relatively few young people with disabilities from the target group for this research, who left school within the last three years and had SNA support in the Senior Cycle, progressed to Higher Education. The predominant view from the Higher Education sector was that young people with disabilities were generally not well prepared for life after school. This was particularly evident in the Higher Education sector, though this varied to some extent by category of disability. This was felt to be due, in part, to the greater level of resources available in the school environment and, also, in part to a culture of dependency on external supports provided. This could also be said of young people in general. The issues are magnified for young people with disabilities in terms of the challenges they face.

In the views expressed, there was also a sense that the Higher Education sector has a particular focus on preparing students for life after Higher Education, that is, progression to further study, labour market, etc. Key informants were of the view that a similar approach was needed in post-primary schools to encourage planning ahead for the next step. They should have a greater focus on preparing students for the next step and this should begin at an early stage, in 4th year. Some of this preparation - which may originate from addressing the needs of students with disabilities, for example, assistive technology - could in fact offer considerable benefits for all students, not just those with disabilities.

5.2.5 Perspectives of employers

Employer informants also highlighted that preparedness of young people with a disability for life after school can vary depending on the disability. Most need more time allocated in the first couple of weeks in employment to adjust to the new environment.

Overall, it was felt that young people with disabilities are not sufficiently prepared for employment as:

- Often young people with disabilities are provided with too much support in the latter stages of post-primary school. This can result in them being in a 'conditioned environment' or 'hand held'. This impacts on their ability to work independently when they reach the workplace
- There is too much emphasis on the theory element of courses and not enough practical support or advice, for example, on how to disclose a disability to an employer
- Many young people with disabilities need more support to develop life skills, for

example, how to get to and from work

- Many young people with disabilities need more support to develop workplace skills, for example, how to be flexible and adapt to different situations / environments

While informants indicated that these are issues faced by all young people entering employment, they felt that, for those with disabilities, the issues were more pronounced. For example, while all young people may need to learn how to adapt to new situations and new people, for young people with a disability this may take longer to achieve. They also may require more support to help integrate them into the workplace. However, employer informants were not able to quantify this difference.

5.3 Supports young people with disabilities need / supports young people with disabilities get– key findings

5.3.1 Perspectives of adult day services staff

Support that young people with disabilities need

Staff from adult day services stated that the support required can vary depending on each young person and the category of disability they have. Overall, staff highlighted the following supports are required by young people with disabilities to help them prepare for life after school:

- **Support from home / families** - the support that young people with disabilities receive at home can make a significant difference on how they cope with the transition to day services
- **Support to help develop day to day living skills** - this was particularly important at a time when young people with disabilities are developing and may wish to become more independent. This could include money management as well as being able to use public transport by themselves etc. In many instances, supported travel was reserved for those young people with only the most severe disabilities. Therefore, the majority of the young people with disabilities in adult day service had to travel independently

“The level of independence is not good in many cases. The young people can barely do things for themselves. They need much more support in becoming independent. That requires tough love. You need to make them do things that they can't or don't want to do. That is the only way they will learn that they can do it for themselves.” (Adult day service staff member)

- **Social Support** - more could be done in schools to encourage social development. This includes ensuring that the young person, where appropriate, has time with peers to make friends and carry out typical social interactions. Staff felt that in some schools the SNA was the only contact the young person had and

this was detrimental to their social development

Support that young people with disabilities get

Overall, it was felt that young people with disabilities were not provided with these supports, prior to, moving into adult day services.

5.3.2 Perspectives of Further Education informants Supports that young people with disabilities need

Further Education informants highlighted that young people with a disability need support at an early stage in order to help them prepare for life after school. Specifically, one interviewee stated that there should be an effective transition programme which starts at least 2-3 years before leaving school. This plan should incorporate input from the young person with disabilities, their parents, teachers, SNA, and any other professionals who have been involved with the young person.

It was suggested that the support young people with disabilities get can depend on a number of different factors. There was also a view that some young people with disabilities receive more support, than others, depending on the school they attended or the category of disability they have. The key supports that are required to help young people with disabilities prepare for the transition to Further Education include:

- **‘Pre-entry’ visits to Further Education colleges** - some schools bring young people with disabilities on visits to look around the campus, ask any questions about the support they may need, and who can provide this etc.
- **Promotion of independence / independent study skills** - this is only being achieved, to a certain extent, within the constraints of the curriculum, due to the limited time available in the Senior Cycle. Independent learning can be an issue for those used to structured learning and/or a routine timetable. Many young people with disabilities do not have the independent study skills required. For example, in some cases they do not know how to approach an assignment or do not know how to take responsibility for their own work because they are accustomed to someone else directing them
- **Life skills / transition planning** - young people with disabilities should be provided with greater support to develop ‘real life’ skills that would help them to prepare for life after post-primary school and a ‘different way of learning’

Support that young people with disabilities get

None of the informants felt that young people with disabilities were provided with the supports they needed nor that support was provided at a sufficiently early stage. However, interviewees felt that the majority of young people with a disability are able to ‘get on’ and cope well in Further Education. A key issue, however, can be social engagement and the ability of young people with disabilities to socially interact

or exhibit appropriate social behaviour. This can be a challenge for staff as well as other students in the Further Education environment.

5.3.3 Perspectives of Higher Education informants

Support that young people with disabilities need

The supports that young people with disabilities need to help prepare for life after school and, in particular, in the Higher Education environment varies to some extent by category of disability and include:

- **Development of greater independence** and reduce dependence on external supports/level of support available in the school environment
- Support with **basic computer literacy**, such as sending and receiving emails, sending attachments, typing
- **Knowledge and awareness** of how to access and use a wide range of **assistive technology**, including, free apps on smartphones
- **Study skills** and strategies to cope with the academic demands of the Higher Education environment. The move to Higher Education sees a move away from rote learning towards independent learning, also independent and critical appraisal skills. Lectures typically deliver a large volume of information in relatively short blocks of time and this pose challenges for some young people with disabilities both auditory and in relation to information processing
- Support to **adapt to new environments** including:
 - Practical support, such as, orientation visits to become familiar with campus layout; distances between buildings, should there be a need for a mobility aid, etc.
 - Coping skills and development of resilience to adapt to the change, particularly, for those on the Autism Spectrum Disorder /Asperger's' spectrum who tend to find change difficult
- **Social skills** to engage and build relationships with peers

Support that young people with disabilities get

In general, it was not felt that young people with disabilities were provided with these supports prior to participating in Higher Education.

5.3.4 Perspectives of employers

Support that young people with disabilities need

Employer informants described key supports that young people with a disability needed in order to be prepared for the workplace. These included:

- **Support to develop social skills.** Informants felt that there is not enough help for young people with, for example, intellectual disabilities to engage with their peers and / or perform to the best of their ability. Whilst there are some initiatives, such as, quiet corridors' for students with autism, schools should

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implement more initiatives for young people with a disability that would be conducive to their learning and development and social interactions

- **Support to develop life skills.** Young people with a disability often need additional support to develop skills for everyday tasks, such as using public transport. One key informant noted
“Young people should be supported to develop practical life skills that are relative to their disability and their new environment” (Key informant from an employment representative body)
- **Support to work independently.** More support is required to facilitate the transition from school life where, for the most part, everything is prepared for young people with disabilities. The work environment can be very different, for example, it requires young people to be able to work on their own initiative etc. This was described by one key informant as follows:
“In employment, and to gain employment there are basic skills that all people, including those with disabilities need. This means that whilst in school there should be a greater focus on those life skills and particularly independence skills.” (Employment facilitator)

The broader context should also be borne in mind in terms of employer’s responsibilities: In employment, one key informant noted

“The support needed can vary, however, in the workplace there is an onus to make reasonable accommodations” (Key informant from an employment representative body)

Support that young people with disabilities get

Overall, it was felt that young people with disabilities were not provided with these supports prior to moving into employment.

5.4 Supports provided by SNAs to young people with disabilities – key findings

5.4.1 Introduction

The research sought to determine how the SNAs facilitated preparation for life after school for young people with disabilities and which supports were deemed to be effective.

Given the key informants’ limited knowledge of the day-to-day working of the SNAs, challenges faced by the SNA and areas of good practice, in terms of effective SNA support, was not covered.

5.4.2 Perspectives of adult day services staff

Staff from adult day services noted that SNAs provided a significant amount of support to young people with a disability while in school. While SNAs can often give

“100%” to individual young people with disabilities on a one to one basis, they require greater support to express themselves and ‘discover what they can do for themselves’. (Adult day service staff member)

5.4.3 Perspectives of Further Education informants

Further Education informants highlighted that the role of the SNAs can vary between schools. The support they provided is not focused on preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Rather, this is focused on the needs of the young person while in school. This supports them with:

- **Physical access needs**, for example, for practical subjects like home economics
- **Physical care needs**
- **Organisational skills**, for example, having the appropriate books for classes etc

It was suggested that, in some cases, the SNA can have a less favourable impact on preparing young people with disabilities. They can become too dependent on their SNA for support. When they reach Further Education and do not have this level of support they are ‘completely lost’. Hence it was suggested that there should be an agreed line between assisting and ‘doing for them’ and a gradual reduction in SNA support as time progresses, where appropriate to do so. This would enable young people with disabilities to be more prepared to cope on their own when they reach Further Education.

Moreover, it was suggested that preparing students for life after school should be a multi-disciplinary approach. If SNAs are to have a part in this they would require more guidance and training in this area.

Overall, Further Education informants did not feel that the SNA facilitated preparation for life after school.

5.4.4 Perspectives of Higher Education informants

The perspective of the Higher Education sector representatives was that SNAs have a specific role. This is tightly defined and focused on providing specific support to young people with disabilities around medical needs, etc. In practice, it was recognised that the SNA role operated beyond these boundaries and does support the education journey. SNAs are not required to have formal teaching qualifications for the SNA role and, therefore, are not formally qualified to deliver educational support. Although the role does not require the SNAs to have relevant qualifications to do this, in practice, some SNAs are involved in supporting the education of young people with disabilities.

There was a concern that the approach to allocating SNAs to students, in some schools, contributed to a dependency culture. One SNA allocated to one pupil for a number of years, rather than, a more flexible allocation of the SNA resource contributed to this. This has the potential to cause difficulties later when a student who is entitled to an education assistant in Higher Education may express a

preference to only work with one assistant and is not willing to work with a range of assistants.

The Higher Education sector representatives did not consider that the SNAs had a particular role in the preparation of young people with disabilities for life after school in general, nor Higher Education in particular. It was likely that not all SNAs would be aware of student life and experience in Higher Education and this would make it difficult for them to adequately prepare students.

5.4.5 Perspectives of employers

Employer informants also highlighted that SNAs do not have a specific role in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school as their role is to provide support in the school environment and not to prepare them or develop the skills needed for employment. Similar to Further Education informant feedback, employer representatives noted that in some instances SNAs can create a reliance on their role. There is a need to reduce SNA support, where possible, in the final year to prepare for the SNA relationship to end. As noted earlier in the report, the issue of gradual reduction of SNA involvement in order to facilitate the independence of the individual person with a disability is detailed in Circular 0030/2014.

5.5 Supports provided to young people with disabilities after school – key findings

5.5.1 Introduction

Details of the support provided to young people with disabilities in their current occupation was discussed, generally, in school and in their current occupation. Key informants were also asked to compare these with supports provided in school in order to consider if these were complementary, whether the supports in school provided adequate preparation and whether supports were required after school to bridge the gap between school leaving and engaging in life after school.

Given the key informants' limited knowledge of the day-to-day working of the SNAs and supports in school, some of these issues could not be covered, for example, whether these were complementary. When asked whether the support provided was adequate preparation for life after school, informants referred to supports needed and received (see section 5.3).

5.5.2 Perspectives of adult day services staff

Adult day services staff stated that the supports provided to young people with disabilities vary based on the physical or emotional needs of the young person on a day-to-day basis. This might include, for example, if a young person required support learning how to use public transport or to manage money etc. Other support might be providing a listening ear, if they require someone to talk with if they are having any emotional problems.

The range of supports varied between adult day services, however, they typically focused upon the following:

- **Life Skills** – many of the supports were in relation to life skills for example housekeeping, money management, cooking, healthy lifestyle, communication, interacting in social situations
- **Work experience support** - many of those in adult day services were undertaking work based placements in the local area. These were supported by the staff. However, in many instances, the young people with disabilities ,when safe to do so, were responsible for getting to their work placement and carrying out their tasks independently
- **Educational support** – many of the adult day services provided additional education support. This included traditional areas, such as, numeracy and literacy. It also included wider supports, for example, computers, electronic devices, arts and creative skills, horticulture and gardening, receptions skills, answering the telephone etc.

5.5.3 Perspectives of Further Education informants

Further Education informants did not refer to any supports provided to young people with disabilities between leaving school and progressing to Further Education. They stated that the type of supports provided, once young people with disabilities attended Further Education, varied according to the category of disability and the type of course being undertaken. Informants referred to a range of supports that are provided to young people with disabilities at Further Education level. In particular, supports via the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) **Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)** were mentioned. Supports provided include:

- Assistive technology equipment and software
- Personal Assistance
- Note-takers
- Irish Sign Language Interpreters
- Speedtext
- Study skills support

In addition to the above, other support provided via disability support services¹³ includes a 'bio-psycho-social model'. This recognises a holistic approach, in that a young person's educational and social needs are closely intertwined with their social and emotional needs. It supports young people with disabilities to develop in the following areas:

¹³ Information provided by the National Learning Network to RSM PACEC February 2017

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- Cognitive skills
- Academic skills
- Social skills
- Emotional skills
- Communication
- Organisational skills
- Time management
- Managing wellness
- Positive mental health

This is a different approach to that in school, as it encompasses a much wider range of supports. It also incorporates social and emotional needs which, informants felt, were not adequately catered for in school.

It was also noted that, due to the nature and level of support provided at post-primary school, young people with disabilities can have high expectations of support at Further Education. It can be difficult to meet these expectations.

5.5.4 Perspectives of Higher Education informants

Staff in the Higher Education sector engage with young people with disabilities whilst they are still in school, as well as, after they leave school.

Prior to young people with disabilities enrolling in Higher Education, staff from the Higher Education sector seek to engage with them through a variety of routes. This is primarily to raise awareness and encourage young people with disabilities to think and plan ahead:

- **Higher Options** – annual student expo. This provides thousands of students with the opportunity to meet and speak directly with representatives, including staff from Disability Services, from all the main Irish universities and colleges, as well as, many from the UK, Europe and further afield
- **Better Options** – annual college fair for students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties. This provides an opportunity for students to find out about courses and support services provided by colleges as well as garner key information on the access routes for those with disabilities. Disability Services staff attend these events
- **Summer schools/events** – strategic funding was previously in place to run residential summer schools in some universities. These provided an introductory taster to student life for some students with disabilities still in post-primary school. Some institutions continue to offer these on a smaller scale, typically one-day events
- **Outreach work** – The scale and extent of outreach activity depends on the

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size/resources of the Higher Education Institution. This might include for example:

- Open evening – adult disability services and other colleagues to raise awareness of services
- Disability services – visits to link schools
- **Access/Foundation to Third Level** – these courses offer a stepping-stone between the post-primary school and third level education. These aim to provide participants with the skills, such as study skills, writing/communication skills, IT skills, and knowledge necessary to undertake a full-time third level course. They also provide an element of education guidance to help students to identify and choose the third level course best suited to their interests and abilities

Once young people with disabilities are enrolled in Higher Education Institutions, staff in Disability Services in the institution, engage with them to assess their needs and provide accommodations to address these, where appropriate. However, the onus is on the young person with a disability to seek support, rather than, the Disability Services staff “recruiting” students to avail of the service. In some instances, students with disabilities do not seek out Disability Services initially, but perhaps having experienced challenges in their first year, seek support at a later stage.

Types of support on offer might include, where appropriate:

- A personal assistant if the student is entitled to one
- One to one and/or group learning support to students
- Special accommodations for examinations
- Assistive technology

Where a school provides the Higher Education Institutions with sufficient information about supports that a student receives in school and the student requirements, transition is, generally, relatively straightforward.

Given the Higher Education key informants did not feel that the supports provided in school were adequate, they have further work to do to bridge the gap between school and Higher Education. Some practical examples of the support provided to bridge the gap included:

- Showing young people with disabilities how to use and get the best from iPhone and iPad
- Introducing and using assistive technology, including, free apps on smart phones for speech to text and vice versa
- Teaching young people with disabilities how to type. This is essential for completing assignments
- Teaching young people with disabilities how to send and receive emails with

attachments

5.5.5 Perspectives of employers

Employer informants did not refer to any supports provided to young people with disabilities between leaving school and entering employment. While employer informants noted that there are some supports available in the workplace, for example disability champions¹⁴, such initiatives are not widespread. There is the potential for more innovative approaches like this to be used.

Employer informants reported that some of the issues encountered by young people with a disability could be applicable to any new employee, for example job fit, correct skill set for the role etc. There is the potential for HR managers to have a greater awareness of the implications of a disability on work and the need supportive equipment etc., based on the employee's specific role.

“Aside from those who receive support from an employment facilitator there is nothing to support young people with disabilities who are seeking employment after school.” (Employment facilitator)

5.6 Reflecting on preparation for life after school and the support provided in school – key findings

5.6.1 Introduction

This explores whether young people with disabilities got the support they needed in school, in particular from the SNA, and whether it helped them prepare for life after school and equipped them for what they are doing now. It also investigated what could have been done differently, in particular, by the SNA, and what impact this would have had on the young people with disabilities, in terms of what they are now doing. This also explores the level of support being provided to them now.

5.6.2 Perspectives of adult day services staff

Adult day service staff agreed that young people with disabilities require support in relation to education, social and emotional issues and life skills. In addition, adult day service staff noted that young people with disabilities also require psychological support to help them decide where to progress to after post-primary school and decide on the 'right path'.

Young people with disabilities leaving post-primary school are at an important transition in their lives and require more psychological support to explain the changes they are or will be going through and what their future options are. The need for this type of support was greater for those transitioning to adult day services or training centres than those who were transferring to Higher Education or Further Education who, typically, were more able to cope with new situations and environments.

¹⁴ A programme designed to develop individuals with the skills required to support disabled people in the workplace

Many of the staff interviewed felt strongly that, at present, young people with disabilities are being let down by the support systems in place in school. They also felt that at the end of school many face a “cliff edge” in terms of the support provided. Staff agreed that more needed to be done earlier to encourage independence and the ability for the young people with disabilities to do things for themselves. In many instances, the staff stated that a young person would come to the service for a trial period -normally a week in the summer- before moving there on a full time basis. This presented them with the opportunity to learn about the service but it did not provide them with the experience of mixing with other young people with disabilities, of travelling to the service independently and, most importantly, of the change in support level. In schools, SNA support is often one-to-one, whereas, in the service, young people may work in groups of up to ten with one member of staff. The staff believed that a transition programme should be in place throughout Senior Cycle. It should focus on preparing young people with disabilities for life after school and encouraging their parents to support this.

Adult day service staff agreed that the provision of additional support mechanisms to help prepare for life after school, including progressing to adult day services, would have a significant impact on the young people with disabilities in terms of what they are currently doing. With greater support, the young people with disabilities could come to the adult day services and make greater initial progress. This would happen as their base level skills, particularly, in relation to social interaction and life skills, for example, independent travel on transport, would already be developed to an appropriate level. This would enable the staff in the adult day services to focus on new supports and skills.

5.6.3 Perspectives of Further Education informants

Key informants in the Further Education sector reported that how prepared young people with disabilities are for Further Education can vary. This is due to a range of personal factors and the level of support provided a post-primary school. Key informants felt that not all young people with disabilities were getting the support they needed and in particular young people with disabilities required:

- Support with independent living and study skills. This support is not currently provided at post-primary school level and there is a focus on getting young people with disabilities through the year academically. There is not enough support for personal and social development
- Better guidance to ensure that Further Education and their chosen course is the right route for them. It was noted that there is a lack of resources for Guidance Counsellors and they do not have the time to sufficiently prepare young people with disabilities for moving to Further Education

Overall, it was noted that young people with disabilities should be supported to be able to become independent learners and to be able to self-manage their difficulties. It was not felt by key informants that the SNA has a clearly defined role to play in this and, in some cases, the support provided by the SNA can be detrimental to the

development of a young person's independence. Informants did not state, however, who should be responsible for developing these independent living skills.

Key informants were also of the view that the impact of providing these supports would help the young person to integrate better. It could reduce the number of young people with disabilities who may drop out as they find the first few months of third level education to be too intense and they do not have the skills to manage this. It could also reduce the amount of time required by staff to, for example, help a young person plan an assignment etc.

5.6.4 Perspectives of Higher Education informants

In general, it was not felt that young people with disabilities were provided with the supports they actually needed to progress to and participate in Higher Education.

Consequently, considerable resource is required to help to equip young people with disabilities with these skills in their first year. This added to the burden/workload for the young person in what can be an intense first year. The acquisition of these skills comes on top of coping with the transition to a new environment and adapting to learning more independently and an increased academic workload.

In some institutions, in particular Institutes of Technology where resources were scarcer, this provides a further challenge both for the institution and the student with a disability.

Should the supports have been available earlier, this would release some resource in Higher Education Institutions to focus on supporting students with disabilities to continue to participate, rather than, helping them to "step up" to participate and would also make the transition for the student smoother.

Higher Education sector representatives highlighted that the provision of these supports and encouraging greater independence amongst students with disabilities did not fall solely on the SNA scheme. Other factors also contribute to this, including:

- Improved transition planning
- The role of post-primary school staff including teachers and Guidance Counsellors
- The use of technology
- State Examinations Commission, with regard to accommodations allowed at second level

5.6.5 Perspectives of employers

Employer informants suggested that young people with a disability are not prepared for the transition from school to the world of work. Specifically, it was noted, that young people with disabilities need:

- Greater support to find work placements and develop workplace skills before

leaving school

- Support to develop the skills require to manage the activities of daily living, in particular to be able to travel independently to and from work
- Support to develop the confidence to articulate their disability and any accommodations needed to employers. It was noted, that this can be a particular issue as often new employees do not disclose their disability. When the employer realises there is a problem, the employee may already be on a performance improvement plan
- More support and guidance on how to 'sell themselves' to employers, that is, what their abilities are, rather than, their disabilities

Employer informants indicated that the impact of such supports would be that young people with disabilities would be more prepared for the world of work.

5.7 Summary

The evidence from key informants highlights that how prepared a young person is for life after school is multi-faceted. Their level of preparedness may be influenced by their background, category of disability, home environment and the type or level of previous support provided in post-primary school. This suggests that while support provided by the post-primary school including the SNA, this is only 'part of the puzzle'. It is clear, therefore, that the preparation of young people with a disability for life after school requires a range of people to have an input and work in partnership to provide a holistic matrix of supports to meet a range of needs.

There are benefits to SNAs and young people with disabilities building relationships. There was an overall consensus, however, that young people with a disability can often become dependent on one-to-one SNA support. This can hinder them from mixing with their peers. As a result, they do not easily form relationships with new people or colleagues after they leave school.

It is noted that a similar point is raised by the Department of Education and Skills in Circular 0030/2014:

...in order to give those pupils every opportunity possible to develop independent skills, the assistive SNA's support which is given to them should always be at the minimum level required to meet the care needs of the pupil.

The alternative would be the provision of too much SNA support, where a child can be overly shadowed or constantly monitored by an attached adult. As evidenced in the policy review, this can lead to social isolation, frustration, feelings of exclusion and can act as a barrier to a child achieving independent living skills.¹⁵

¹⁵ Op. cit. **Circular 0030/2014**, page 15

Therefore, consideration must be given as to how the SNA resource is effectively used in schools. In the first instance, this requires an understanding of what constitutes an effective SNA support. In deploying the SNA resource, it would also be important to balance the benefits of SNAs and young people with disabilities building appropriate relationships, with the flexibility that different SNAs can support different young people. Relationships between SNAs and young people can be mutually beneficial. These foster an understanding of the young person's needs so that the appropriate level of SNA support may be put in place. SNAs can be a trusted adult to support the young person and, in some cases, a conduit for communication to other staff members. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fundamental purpose of the SNA support: to address the physical care needs of a young person with disabilities.

However, key informants outlined 3 categories of support that they believed young people with a disability need to prepare for life after school. These included supports to develop:

- **Independent study / work skills**, for example, taking notes or how to plan assignments to meet a deadline
- **Life skills**, for example, money management
- **Social skills**, for example, ensuring that the young person, where appropriate, has time with peers to make friends and carry out typical social interactions

Respondents felt that few young people, with or without a disability, had these skills when they progressed to third level education or employment. However, they felt these gaps were more pronounced for young people with a disability. For example, it was suggested that those with Autism Spectrum Disorder may find it more difficult to communicate with peers or colleagues.

Key informants in the Higher Education sector, in particular, highlighted that there should be a greater forward planning in post-primary school on preparing all young people for the next stage of their life. They noted that, in the same way that Higher Education Institutions focus on progression to further study or the labour market, schools should also focus some support on progression to education, training or employment and tailor support accordingly. This complements the feedback provided by young people, which highlighted that Guidance Counsellors often do provide advice or support that is too generic.

This feedback raises questions about the overall support provided to young people as they prepare to leave post-primary school. This includes how best the specific needs of young people with disabilities in preparing for life after school can be identified and who should be responsible for providing support to address such needs.

Interestingly, while some informants referred to the SNA role as one focused on day-to-day support, rather than, forward planning, the majority of key informants were not aware of the specific support provided by the SNA. This is not entirely unexpected given that third level and employer representatives would have limited

contact with the SNA. However, in the wider context of providing appropriate support to prepare young people for life after school, it is indicative of a need for greater communication between post-primary schools and future destinations. This could cover, for example, what support has been provided within the school environment and what may be required in the next setting.

The support provided in the post school environment varied depending on individual needs. However common across Further Education and Higher Education and employer informants were practical accommodations, such as, scribes, IT software, sign language interpreters etc. In the workplace, support is, more typically, based on initiatives or schemes to raise awareness of disabilities. This variation demonstrates a lack of consistency in the support that young people with a disability can expect to receive when they leave post-primary school. Further research may be needed to explore the specific type of support that is most appropriate to each setting and what role second level education has, in this regard.

6 School visits

6.1 Introduction – including school profile and sample information

This chapter presents the findings from a series of face to face interviews and focus groups with school principals, staff and SNAs. This involved visits to 10 schools (8 post-primary and 2 special) and interviews with 10 principals, 18 staff and focus groups with 31 SNAs.

Full details of the school visits are available in Appendix 2, page 19.

6.2 Overview

This is a summary of the key issues that have emerged, which are discussed in more detail later in this chapter:

- All principals, staff and SNAs indicated that how prepared a young person is for their life after school is not attributable to one single factor and there are a number of contributing elements. These elements include:
 - Category of disability
 - Severity of the disability
 - How well suited the young person's capacity is to the destination they plan to progress to
- The support required to help a young person with a disability to be prepared for life after school can vary widely depending on their specific needs. The following are the most common areas of support that principals and staff said were required
 - Life skills
 - Social/communication skills
 - Emotional support
 - Educational/learning support
- Overall, principals and staff indicated that provision for young people with disabilities mainly focused on educational support, for example, the Leaving Certificate Applied
- All principals, staff and SNAs were of the view that the SNA carried out a range of tasks that often went beyond practical care needs. However, the nature, frequency and extent of these tasks varied across schools. In addition, principals and staff highlighted that, while SNAs can provide effective support to develop life, social and communication skills, there is a need to decrease the amount of support provided, where possible, at Senior Cycle to prepare the young people with disabilities for moving on. Different schools had different approaches to dealing with this
- Principals, staff and SNAs, in both mainstream and special schools, suggested

there was scope to develop the focus of the SNA resource. This could be widened to reflect wider care needs or emotional needs

- All SNAs referred to the challenges they faced. However, for most SNAs these focused on what they were not able to do or constraints that they faced, rather than, challenges in what was expected of them. For example, many SNAs felt they could better support young people with disabilities for life after school if they had time to support the young person with areas, such as, life skills
- SNAs also referred to the need for additional training to help them fulfil their role. Areas that were mentioned included training relating to administering medication and continuing professional development
- Opinions were mixed in relation to the key characteristics of an effective SNA support. However, there were a number of recurring themes. These include:
 - Personal qualities of the SNA
 - SNAs' knowledge of the environment in which they worked
 - A robust, in-built understanding of the role of the SNA within the school

6.3 Preparedness for life after school – key findings

6.3.1 Perspectives of principals and staff

Principals and key staff, in both mainstream and special schools, stated that how prepared young people with disabilities are for life after school can vary significantly between students. Principals and staff noted that students are 'as prepared as they [can] be', while one principal noted that

“some will never be prepared for life after school however we try to bring them to the optimum level of skills” (Principal of a post-primary school)

They highlighted that some young people with mild learning difficulties can often progress through school, complete their Leaving Certificate, with additional learning support from the teacher and the SNA where required, and then function within society. However, for other young people with disabilities there can be a large variation in the level of preparedness. For example, those with Down Syndrome often do not cope well with new environments and, therefore, transferring to a new setting can be particularly difficult. Those with physical disabilities need more practical support and/or emotional support to cope with their individual challenges. In some cases, young people with disabilities are

“not prepared enough when they leave the safety of secondary school”. (Principal of post-primary school)

Overall, the majority of consultees felt that the level of preparedness depends on:

- The category of disability
- The severity of the disability
- The “fit” between the capacity of the young person and the type of destination they were intending to move onto. The capacity and abilities of the young person and how well suited these were to their next destination has an impact on how prepared they were to progress. Different destinations require different elements of preparedness. For example, principals and staff felt that young people with disabilities wishing to attend Higher Education may require different support to those wishing to enter employment.

6.3.2 Perspectives of SNAs

The SNAs interviewed in both mainstream and special schools highlighted that how prepared a young person is to leave school can vary. Some young people with disabilities have met their milestones / agreed personal targets as part of their Individual Education Plan (IEP)¹⁶ and are ready to move on. Other young people with disabilities will always need help and will never be independent due to the nature of this disability. Some young people with disabilities, for example, will always need support with personal care as well as day-to-day living, due to either physical or intellectual disability that could prevent them from engaging effectively with others.

SNAs suggested that parents of young people with disabilities can be a barrier to supporting progression in two ways:

- **Their expectations can be too low.** Parents of young people with disabilities do not explore all of the options that are available or do not believe that the student would be able to cope without them or the SNA
- **Their expectations are too high.** Parents of young people with disabilities are aiming for their child to achieve something that might not be possible for them to attain, and in the process missing out on what essential skills they may require

“Parental expectations can have a significant impact on young people with disabilities. For some parents, there is a refusal to acknowledge that their son or daughter need additional support. For others, there is an over protection of their son or daughter which has a detrimental impact on them.” (SNA in post-primary school)

¹⁶ An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for a named student which specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals.

6.4 Supports young people with disabilities need/supports young people with disabilities get – key findings

6.4.1 Perspectives of principals and staff

Supports that young people with disabilities need

School principals and staff in both school types highlighted in their views that young people with disabilities required a range of different supports to prepare for life after school. One principal noted:

"The range of supports required by young people with disabilities is individualistic". (Staff member in post-primary school)

The range of supports varied depending on the environment the young person had come from, for example, their socio-economic background, their abilities, as well as where they wanted to go or what the desired outcome was. In terms of outcomes, some young people with disabilities would aspire to progress to Further Education or training, others would have different goals in their Individualised Education Plans, such as placement, in adult day services, based on their requirement for support to complete day to day tasks independently. Principals highlighted that each young person required:

"A structured plan for independence that sets out the challenges they will experience and ensure they are working towards overcoming these" (Principal of a post-primary school)

Overall, principals and staff highlighted a number of supports as being required for most young people with a disability to help them prepare for life after school. This mainly focused on life skills, confidence building, social / communication skills and emotional and educational support. While these supports are similar to those required by any young person leaving post-primary school, principals and staff suggested that young people with a disability required greater support in these areas. Specific details provided on the support required include:

- **Life skills** – the importance of being able to do everyday things. These include for example, making own travel arrangements, going to the shops, going to a bank to open and manage a bank account or being able to cook and clean and 'look after themselves'. School staff emphasised the importance of developing life skills for young people with disabilities to prepare them for the 'real world'. Furthermore, staff discussed promoting an inclusive environment in which young people with disabilities are involved in all aspects of school life. Staff stated that engaging with their peers was an important part of their social and interpersonal skills
- **Confidence** – young people with disabilities need to develop confidence on how

to handle everyday living and not only be able to obtain a Leaving Certificate. Staff felt that young people with disabilities often leave school and they are still very dependent on their parents / family. This suggests that there needs to be a greater emphasis on 'learning in school what is done for them at home'

- **Social / communication skills** –young people with a disability require additional support to develop their social skills. Being able to communicate and interact is hugely important to being part of the wider community / society. Students, for example those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, may not have the time or opportunity to do this without support as they can often be more withdrawn and indifferent to others or be unaware of appropriate social behaviour. Therefore, they require support to develop social skills and be able to interact appropriately with others
- **Emotional support** – young people with a disability can often require additional emotional support to help them to cope with the challenges faced in school in relation to learning. These included, stress and anxiety in relation to exams; not being able to concentrate in class for extended periods of time; taking longer to process and understand information provided in class. In addition, some young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder do not cope well with unexpected changes. Therefore, the SNA can support them in such situations by taking them to one side to talk them through the situation and help them to remain calm
- **Educational / learning support** – young people with disabilities need support to help learn while in school, this includes:
 - Note taking
 - Making notes simpler and more accessible
 - Extra time with a young person to explain concepts and areas of the curriculum
 - Helping with project work, for example, with the structure and content
 - Dictating notes that are recorded so that young people with disabilities can replay these and listen to them again
- **Support from home / parents of young people with disabilities** –the role of parents/guardians and other family members of young people with disabilities/ is significant in helping prepare the young person to become more independent. They can do this by helping them to learn basic skills, such as, putting on their own clothes, personal hygiene and how to handle money etc. Staff felt that this was important to help reinforce anything that they or the SNA was doing in school. It was also felt that the parents of young people with disabilities should understand the young person's needs and capabilities to help inform the next step/options.
- **Communication / collaboration between the school and the young person's next destination** – there is scope for greater communication between the post-primary school and the next destination for the young person, Higher Education, Further Education, adult day service, training provider or

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employer, to facilitate the transition and integration at this next stage. One staff member noted that

“there is a lack of career guidance time...and a need for more direct contact with what is out there”. (Staff member in post-primary school)

This could involve visits to the next destination by the young person accompanied by a staff member or an SNA and identify any possible support they might require.

Support that young people with disabilities get

Of the supports the young people with disabilities require listed above, principals and staff felt that the supports in school currently provided focus on educational/learning support. However, the SNA can often help with the development of life skills, confidence and social/communication skills on an individual basis, though this was not a formal part of their role.

Both staff and principals highlighted that the curriculum can also be a limiting factor. Alternative courses, for example, Leaving Certificate Applied¹⁷ are available but they cannot always be provided, due to lack of resources to deliver these.

6.4.2 Perspectives of SNAs

Supports that young people with disabilities need

Similar to school principals and staff, SNAs highlighted in their views that young people with a disability require support to develop life skills, social and communication skills. In addition to these, SNAs also referred to the following:

- **One-to-one support** - need for more one-to-one practical support for young people with a disability
- **Good career guidance** - need more information on what students are able to do after school, this should be provided from 3rd year onwards (i.e. 13-14 years old¹⁸) and not wait until the last year

Support that young people with disabilities get

SNAs highlighted that the following support was available:

- **Leaving Certificate Applied** – SNAs in most schools highlighted that the

¹⁷ The Leaving Certificate Applied is a distinct, self-contained Leaving Certificate programme. It is designed for those students who do not wish to proceed directly to third level education or for those whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes (Leaving Certificate (Established) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme).

¹⁸ This is consistent with the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (Action 5.1) which includes a similar recommendation from age 13

Leaving Certificate Applied¹⁹ provides students with disabilities with the option to complete vocational courses. As well as, being more vocational in nature, these are completed at a slower pace and often better suited to young person's needs

- **Review meetings** – in one school, SNAs noted that there are regular review meetings to discuss the progress of the young person with disabilities. These involve the principal, resource teacher, SNA, parent and psychologist and they all help to inform the goals set for the young person through joint working and discussion. This was highlighted as being beneficial in providing a holistic assessment of the young person's needs and the level of support required
- **Life skills** – SNAs believed that young people with disabilities were only supported to develop life skills in a limited way during resource hours and / or with support from the SNA, when it is possible to do so. For example, the teaching of life skills by the SNA can be limited to going to the canteen with the young person to buy their own lunch etc.
- **Psychologist support** – specifically, this is support provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) outside of school

Overall, the SNAs indicated that the support provided for young people with a disability to prepare for life after school can often be limited and not meet their needs outside of the curriculum.

6.5 Supports provided by SNAs to pupils with disabilities – including effectiveness – key findings

6.5.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the feedback provided by interviewees on the supports provided by SNA to young people with a disability and how effective these were perceived to be.

6.5.2 Perspectives of principals and staff

All principals and staff acknowledged that the role of the SNA was primarily to support a young person's care needs. However, all indicated that SNAs provided support that was beyond physical care needs and helped to meet the emotional, social and educational needs of the young people with disabilities they supported. In a minority of schools, those interviewed indicated that SNAs could be used to meet other needs within the school. This included, administrative tasks, for example, photocopying, as well as, supervisory tasks, for example, providing supervision at break and lunchtimes.

¹⁹ The Leaving Certificate Applied is a distinct, self-contained Leaving Certificate programme. It is designed for those students who do not wish to proceed directly to third level education or for those whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes (Leaving Certificate (Established) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme).

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The principals identified a number of ways in which the SNAs supported young people to be better prepared for life after school. These included:

- **Life skills** – SNAs play a role in teaching a young person day to day living skills, how to organise themselves and stress management, for example, helping young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder to cope with an unexpected variation in their routine
- **Emotional support** – SNAs help to develop the confidence of the young person and help them “to believe that they can achieve something”, as well as, “SNA giving [the child] a chance to be [themselves] and grow in every way” (Learning Support Officer in a post-primary school)
- SNAs can also have an **informal pastoral care role** as the SNA is often the first adult a young person will engage with to discuss any issues they might be having

In some instances, principals and staff also noted that SNAs were more involved in the school infrastructure, including:

- Participation with school development planning, and co-operation with any changes in policies or practice
- Engagement with parents of young people with disabilities in both formal and informal structures within the school and school-related activities as required
- Attendance and participation at multi-disciplinary meetings within school

The involvement of the SNA was seen to be slightly more intensive in special schools than in mainstream schools. In special schools, principals, staff and SNAs reported that SNAs had a greater pastoral role and was a point of contact between the pupil and teacher. However, some staff also indicated that:

“SNAs do not always have a role in decisions about the future of young people with disabilities and they should be part of the discussion” (Principal in a post-primary school)

The importance of withdrawing the level of SNA support was also highlighted. Specifically, decreasing the level of support is important to allow the student to become more independent in preparation for life after school. However, it was acknowledged that this should be in the context of a support plan that is regularly reviewed. In some of the schools visited, there was a strict policy in place in relation to the staged withdrawal of SNA support as a young person with disabilities progressed through post-primary school. In other schools, whilst they did withdraw support, it was done on a more ad hoc basis and was largely assessed based on the needs of the young person with disabilities. However, often this reduction in SNA support is not possible, in the best interests of the student, due to the nature of the disability.

Staff described the key characteristics of a successful SNA as one that is going beyond the narrow definition of their role. Specifically, it was stated that:

- Someone who is aware of the needs of students and is willing to take the necessary steps to support the student educationally and emotionally with the aim of achieving/promoting independence to allow to the student to transition to life after school
- Flexible/adaptable to different situations and the needs of different students with different categories of disabilities
- Empathy – to understand the individual needs of each young person and be empathetic to these
- Calm and even-tempered – to cope with challenging situations and
- Teamwork – to work with other SNAs and other teachers

6.5.3 Perspectives of SNAs

SNAs in both school types highlighted a number of ways in which they support young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school. It was acknowledged, that in the majority of instances these additional supports were provided by SNAs on top of their existing role. These additional supports included, for example, communication support, emotional support, and life skills support i.e. teaching them how to use money and getting to and from school using public transport. This was, generally, as a result of experience and, in some instances, training that they had received. In all instances, additional supports were provided on a voluntary basis because of the SNA's understanding about the holistic needs of young people with disabilities that they were working with that were not otherwise being met. For example, one SNA noted

“(that) the curriculum does not prepare them, the SNA prepares them” (SNA from a post-primary school)

There was no evidence to suggest that these additional supports were as a result of the expectations of schools, students, or the parents of the young people with disabilities. The additional supports were not uniformly provided, due to the fact that they were outside the prescribed role of the SNA. In schools, where the SNAs did not provide any additional support, this was often due to the capacity of the SNA to take on other support roles.

In addition to the development of life skills; emotional support and personal development, referred to by principals and staff, SNAs referred to:

- **Developing social skills** – a number of SNAs reported going on trips with young people with disabilities and helping them to interact with other students. They also mentioned going with them to after school activities to get them

involved and mix socially, for example, in variety shows

“The social skills of the young people with disabilities is often the area they need most support with. They are naturally nervous about social interaction given the nature and extent of their disability.” (SNA from a post-primary school)

- **Supporting personal development** – in one school, the SNAs organised external activities linked to the interests of the young person they were supporting, for example, guitar lessons, supporting in order to develop their talents. This might not otherwise have been possible
- **Organisation skills** – all SNAs reported helping young people with disabilities to arrange books for classes and write down homework etc. They emphasised this was done to teach the young person as to how to do it. After a period of time, they encouraged the young person to do or think about it for themselves, where appropriate
- **Facilitate learning** – all SNAs highlighted that they play a role in communicating between the teacher and the young person as well as helping to “break down what the teacher has said” in the lesson to make it understandable and serving as an “aid to help access to the curriculum”
- **Help with decisions about their future** – in one school, an information day is held where the training centres are invited to provide information to parents of young people with disabilities and pupils. The SNA can also attend this with the pupils and helps the young people to follow up with any questions they might have. However, there were differences in opinion about the purpose of the SNA in attending such an event. Some SNAs viewed their role as contributing to the decision-making process, whilst others felt they were there to support what school/ career guidance staff or parents of young people with disabilities decided was best for the young person

Table 5: Case Study 4 County Donegal, Higher Education, autistic

Case Study 4 County Donegal, Higher Education, Autistic

This case study is concerned with a young female, aged 21 years, who is autistic and lives in County Donegal. She attended a mainstream post-primary school until she was 18 and completed her Leaving Certificate. She then secured a place in an Institute of Technology, which she currently attends. She is in the second year of a three-year programme and enjoys her course.

Her parents believed that she was supported to prepare for life after school and the school provided an inclusive and positive learning environment for young people with disabilities. In particular, her parents stated the SNAs who supported their daughter worked diligently to ensure that she was ready for leaving school. Some of the supports that the SNA provided were learning supports, emotional support, social support, organisational support etc. The SNA also accompanied the young person to the Institute of Technology so that she could see the buildings and meet some of the lecturers. This was felt to have supported her. The parents of this young person identified the school ethos in relation to disabilities was one of the main reasons they decided to send their daughter there.

It was evident from meetings with the principal, SEN team and SNAs in the school that there was a depth of understanding of the needs of people with disabilities throughout the school and of the most appropriate interventions which would support them in becoming independent members of society. The SNA was regarded as a fully integrated member of the team within the school. In particular, the school had an innovative approach to ensuring buy-in and understanding in relation to the SNA. The school developed an SNA policy which set out the duties, responsibilities and role of the SNA. When a young person joined the school, this policy was issued to the young person, their parents, teachers and the SNAs so that everyone was clear on the role and had the same expectations. It is acknowledged that the role described in this document did include elements that would be strictly considered outside of the core remit of the SNA. The school, in consultation with the SNA team and the SEN Co-ordinator, had agreed a revised role to cover their core functions and some additional supports if the requirements of the young person with disabilities warranted these.

The school demonstrated a degree of flexibility in how the SNA resource was used and the role was delivered by SNAs. In conjunction with the teaching staff, the SNA was able to shape the planning for the young person, to hold meetings with the young person and with parents to discuss progress, issues etc. The school also operated a policy of staged withdrawal of SNA support, if this was in the interests of the young person. As the young person progressed, within the school, the intensity of the SNA support was reduced. This

Case Study 4 County Donegal, Higher Education, Autistic

supported the development of independence and confidence that the young person could deal with life with less SNA support.

6.6 Focus of the SNA resource – key findings

6.6.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the feedback provided by interviewees on how the SNA resource could be refocused in the future to meet the needs of young people with a disability.

6.6.2 Perspectives of principals and staff

Principals and staff suggested that the role of the SNA should be widened to acknowledge and recognise the work already being done by the SNAs and to ensure that this is accepted throughout the school system. Specifically, some principals and staff indicated that the definition of care needs should be broader than physical care and should, also, encompass mental, emotional and social care needs. The staff noted that “care needs are not necessarily physical”. Moreover, one principal noted that

“the role of the SNA needs to be broader, less restricted and they should be allowed to be more involved in the decision making process regarding the future of the young person they are supporting”
(Principal in a post-primary school)

6.6.3 Perspectives of SNAs

SNAs suggested a number of ways their role could be re-focused. These included:

- **Widening of their role** – a number of SNAs felt that they were best placed to help students with other difficulties they may be experiencing. This would require the SNA to have both the opportunity and training to do this; for example, helping a young person with speech therapy. There was no information provided by consultees on the potential friction that this might cause with regulatory bodies or qualified professionals
- **Life skills** – SNAs reported that helping young people with disabilities to develop life skills was part of what they are doing in practice. For some, developing life skills is currently done in their own time as such activities are not provided for as part of the school day
- **Care needs** – the definition of this should be widened to cover mental, emotional needs
- **Input into future plans** – SNAs indicated that they should / would like to have an input into the Individual Education Plans (IEPs). SNAs indicated they have an insight into what the focus could or should be for the young person and who can best support them to reach the end goal

“We are the staff that work with the young people with disabilities most closely. We believe we could better support them if we

understood the plans for the individuals. We could make better support packages for them”. (SNA in a post-primary school)

- **One to one support** – young people with disabilities can have access to more than one SNA. This can reduce levels of dependency on one person. However, those that are preparing to leave school would benefit from one-to-one support a couple of times a week. The purpose of this support would be to focus on the young person’s individual goals, what they need help with to become more independent or to visit where they plan to go to next. This was felt to be important, as the SNA ‘knows them best’ and what challenges they might face. It is acknowledged that this is a difficult balance to strike between targeted one to one support and the policy of staged withdrawal of SNA support to encourage independence

Table 6: Case Study 5 County Carlow, Employment, Autism Spectrum Disorder

Case Study 5 County Carlow, Employment, Autism Spectrum Disorder
<p>This case study is concerned with a young person with Autism Spectrum Disorder in County Carlow. This young person attended a rural mainstream vocational school, but, had not been engaging with the mainstream classes in the school. The school modified the activities and support provided to him, to better address his needs.</p> <p>The SNA was actively involved in the planning and delivery of these supports. Having left school at 18 years of age, the young person, now aged 20, is currently employed full time, five days per week.</p> <p>In this case, the school ethos is one in which inclusion of students with SEN is regarded as a very high priority. The role of the SNA resource in facilitating this, is viewed as being crucial and ‘should not be under-estimated’. Despite the very narrow job specification outlined by the Department of Education and Skills, it was felt that SNAs deliver on a very broad role. Recognising that the SNAs role is intended to be limited to care needs, in this instance, the school principal and staff felt that the SNAs helped the young people with disabilities to ‘get the best out of school’. The SNAs engage with and motivate the young people with disabilities by identifying ways to support and develop things they had a particular interest in, thus, helping to build their confidence.</p> <p>Staff in this school indicated that the SNAs play a key role in the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). These are viewed as a vital channel of communication between families and school and between the mainstream and SEN staff. As part of developing an IEP, targets were agreed with the parents and pupil based on the desired outcome (in this case to develop independence and gain skills for employment). Based on the Individual</p>

Case Study 5 County Carlow, Employment, Autism Spectrum Disorder

Education Plan, the school modified activities for the young person to reflect his specific needs. This included, for example, driving theory, horticulture, DIY, money skills, how to use public transport etc. Activities were also undertaken to help with his social skills, for example, asking for shopping or ordering lunch. The SNA supported these activities despite these going beyond their core role.

A transition plan was prepared which included work experience. The preparation for life after school and the support offered by the SNA was the 'ideal solution' for this pupil. It involved the parent and the young person to identify what the goals and targets should be. It also helped to manage the young person's anxiety, as well as, develop his life skills and other practical skills in which he had an interest.

School staff felt that the SNA resource is vital to the school's ability to provide the 'ideal solution' for students. The availability of SNA contact time allows for the individualised plan to be formulated and delivered. Without adequate staff resourcing, this would be impossible. The flexibility to tailor the role of the SNA to the needs of individual students is also hugely important. The staff highlighted that schools should be allowed the 'professional courtesy' of making this judgement call.

6.7 Challenges faced by SNAs – key findings

6.7.1 Introduction

Interviewees were asked about the challenges faced by SNAs in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Some of the details included relate to the wider challenges facing the SNAs in school.

6.7.2 Perspectives of principals and staff

Those interviewed acknowledged that SNAs face many and varied challenges in conducting their role in schools including:

- **Stretching the SNA resource** - there is a perception, amongst interviewees, that fewer SNAs are being asked to look after more students directly within schools. This presents significant challenges for SNAs in trying to provide the highest level of support to individual students within the constraints of the resources hours and the time available to do this. Many SNAs often support other students, who did not qualify for SNA support, indirectly. Whilst the nature of this indirect support varied, it often was a result of the close proximity of other young people with disabilities to those being supported by an SNA. The SNA would then assist them as required with issues in class, for example, not understanding an instruction from the class teacher, or missing information in class. Acknowledging that this was out of a genuine concern for the students, it

did, however, often add further to the workload of the SNAs

- **Diverse needs of students** - It is noted that the Department of Education and Skills states that :

(the) provision of SNA support should therefore not be considered as a first response for management of behaviour. SNA support should only be provided where it is clear that behavioural management strategies have not been successful to date and where it is demonstrated how access to such support can assist with ongoing planning and intervention for the child²⁰

However, SNAs were of the view that they faced significant challenges in dealing with the needs of the students. In particular, SNAs faced challenges in working with students with behavioural issues, for example, those who were aggressive or those with anger issues, but they also faced challenges from students with emotional and social issues

“The young people with disabilities have become more challenging. A significant number now have emotional and behavioural problems, which SNAs have to deal with on a daily basis. For example, we have a young person that becomes aggressive if he becomes anxious. SNAs do not have the training to either safely restrain the young person if they pose a threat to other young people with disabilities or to defend themselves if they are under threat. We are talking about a 17/18 year old male who is over 6 foot in height. SNAs are not trained to deal with this situation.” (Principal in a post-primary school)

- **Balancing the role of friend and authority figure** - In many schools, SNAs faced challenges in establishing and maintaining a healthy, professional relationship with the students they supported. In many instances, SNAs were considered to be more of a friend to the students than an authority figure, for example, parent, teacher or principal. There is a risk that this could be misconstrued by the student and, as such, it poses significant challenges for SNAs in managing the relationship. In some cases, the students would discuss very personal matters or would feel comfortable sharing personal information with SNAs. This would reinforce, for the student, the establishment of a close relationship which may be perceived as beneficial by the student. It can lead the young person to consider the SNA as a friend and, perhaps, add them on social media, for example Facebook. In particular, in the age of social media, SNAs need to be particularly careful in managing relationships with students. Given that the role of the SNA falls between that of an authority figure and a friend, SNAs faced challenges in managing the relationship they had with the young people with disabilities

6.7.3 Perspectives of SNAs

SNAs in their views highlighted a number of challenges including:

²⁰ Op.cit. Circular 0030/2014, page 10

- **Increasing rates of behavioural and emotional problems** - Many of the SNAs interviewed stated that their job had become more challenging in recent years due to increasing levels of behavioural and emotional problems amongst students. In many instances, these students did not meet the requirements for SNA support and, thus, were not allocated an SNA. However, in school their health, safety and care needs were viewed as being the responsibility of the SNA, despite the student not being eligible for SNA support. In particular, students with behavioural problems, for example anger issues, could pose a threat to the safety of the SNA; however it was still expected that SNAs support these students
- **Lack of Training / Guidance** - SNAs stated that the lack of training and guidance provided to them caused significant challenges. This included:
 - The SNAs indicated that many of the students they worked with had other medical conditions as well as their disability, for example, diabetes, epilepsy and severe allergies. In all instances, SNAs had received no formal training on how to administer medication to young people with disabilities or how to perform first aid in an emergency situation. The SNAs interviewed indicated that this made them feel uncomfortable and at risk, legally, because they didn't have the training required
 - SNAs have various educational and qualification backgrounds, but all have at least completed a FETAC Level 5 qualification. However, many SNAs stated that this qualification was insufficient to allow them to deal with the challenges faced in school. For example, it did not provide them with the skills to communicate with students with Down Syndrome or autism spectrum disorder, nor the training to deal with aggressive students or those with behavioural issues nor did it provide them with the skills to deal with students with emotional and anxiety issues
- **Supporting the Learning** - all of the SNAs, despite some being trained teachers, acknowledged that they did not have a teaching role. However, they did feel that they had a role in students' learning. This presented a number of challenges:
 - **Level of support provided by the SNA** - boundaries in relation to supporting the students with learning are unclear. In some instances, SNAs would take notes for students, make 'easy read' version notes for students, dictate and audio record classes so that the student could listen back, support students with project work, for example, developing a structure, pointing them to research sources etc. In a minority of cases, SNAs interviewed did not provide this support. In these instances, SNA stuck rigidly to their job description and carried out only the prescribed duties. The challenge for SNAs was finding the balance between supporting the student and influencing their academic work
 - **Lack of knowledge/skills to support Advanced Classes** - whilst SNAs at minimum have a FETAC Level 5 qualification, in some schools, particularly, those who had a lot of students in Senior Cycle, SNAs indicated that they

struggled to support the learning in a meaningful way. This was due to their own lack of education or skills in that particular area. Examples provided included, higher level mathematics at Leaving Cert, higher level languages at Leaving Certificate etc.

- **Feeling responsible for academic achievement** - in some schools, SNAs stated that they felt under pressure to ensure that a student with disabilities achieved their academic potential. This pressure was deemed to come from both the school and parents of young people with disabilities. SNAs stated that these expectations caused them additional stress and anxiety
- **Integration into School Structures** - the level of integration of SNAs into school structures varied between schools and, in some instances, this caused challenges. In particular, in schools where there were few SNAs, many felt isolated and not included as part of the staff. In some extreme instances, SNAs were not allowed to join colleagues in the staff room at designated breaks and lunchtime. Regarding the students, SNAs were often not invited to staff meetings and not involved in the planning for the students they supported. In these cases, SNAs indicated that this created further challenges for them in carrying out their role. This predominantly correlated with schools who did not have a significant number of SNAs or in instances where only one SNA would be in school

6.8 Supporting SNAs to fulfil their role – key findings

6.8.1 Introduction

Interviewees were asked about the supports currently available to SNAs which enable them to fulfil their role and any additional support which SNAs would need.

6.8.2 Perspectives of principals and staff

Principals and staff, in both mainstream and special schools, identified a number of ways in which the SNAs could be better supported to fulfil their role as follows:

- **Clarification of role** - in many instances, there was still a lack of clarity in relation to the role and remit of an SNA amongst other members of staff as well as parents of young people with disabilities. Providing all parties with clarity on the role and remit of the SNA would ensure that there was no misunderstanding. In particular, it would perhaps provide comfort to teachers who can have misgivings about having another adult in the classroom
- **Raising awareness** - key to supporting SNAs in school was to ensure that all in the school understood the important role that they played and the benefit of the work they do with the students. Therefore, it was suggested that undertaking awareness raising activities, for example an information session at a staff meeting, would help everyone in school to understand the important role that an SNA plays in school. It would also go some way to ensuring that there was adequate respect for the role of an SNA
- **Involvement in school** - ensuring the SNAs were integrated into the structure of the school and this was key to supporting them in their role. This involved

making sure the SNAs were invited to participate in full staff events, including both formal meetings, as well as, social events. In addition, it also meant ensuring that they were treated like any other member of staff and that they could use staff facilities, for example, staff room, car park, entrances to school etc.

6.8.3 Perspectives of SNAs

Similar to school principals and staff, SNAs highlighted the importance of greater involvement in the school structure. In addition to this, SNAs indicated a number of ways in which they could be supported in fulfilling their role, as follows:

- **Essential training** - the most important support, which the SNAs identified, was the need for additional training in a number of different areas. SNAs were keen to avail of in-service training and would welcome a programme of statutory training to be provided in areas, such as:
 - Dealing with emotional issues
 - Dealing with behavioural issues
 - Dealing with students with anxiety
 - Self-defence
 - First aid and administering medication – this was felt as necessary as it fell under the SNA remit in relation to care needs. SNAs felt uncomfortable working with young people with disabilities, who had additional medical needs without have sufficient knowledge of what medication was required and how to administer it. For example, one SNA indicated that she had care of a young person with Down Syndrome who also suffered from epilepsy. This SNA was uncomfortable that if the child took a seizure that the SNA did not have the training to administer first aid that could be vital to the young person's health, even though they were most likely to be the most immediate person on the scene
- **Desirable training** - SNAs indicated that they would also appreciate the ability to attend ad-hoc training to refresh skills and / or update their own knowledge and support the students to the fullest extent. In particular, this training would be focused on supporting the learning of the student, for example, refresher on the curriculum and content, particularly given the major changes to the Junior and Leaving Certificates
- **Continuing Professional Development** - many SNAs indicated that there were no in-job opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This is a core part of in-service training for teaching staff to enable them to up-skill and develop their careers. SNAs would welcome the ability to undertake professional development activities
- **Greater involvement in planning for student** - many of the SNAs interviewed were involved in educational planning for the young people with disabilities they supported. The majority would welcome further involvement. By SNAs having an understanding of the educational goals of the young person, they can plan their support accordingly to ensure that the young person's goals are

met

6.9 Good practice – characteristics of effective SNA support – key findings

6.9.1 Perspectives of principals and staff

Principals and staff, in both school types, highlighted a number of key characteristics of effective SNAs including:

- **Patience** - SNAs could be placed in any number of challenging situations and it was vital that they remained calm and even-tempered and tried to listen to the student
- **Discretion and Empathy** - many SNAs had to deal with very personal situations and the students they supported would often discuss very personal issues, for example, relationship problems, family problems, things that make them angry. It was key for the SNA to develop effective relationships with the students, that they were empathetic but also that they demonstrated a degree of discretion, so that, the open communication channel with the student would be maintained
- **Team work** -it was essential that SNAs could work as part of a team. This had two dimensions:
 - Firstly, that they could work together effectively for the sake of the students that they supported
 - Secondly, that they could work within the school infrastructure. This included, for example, with SEN teachers and co-ordinators and with Senior Management Teams etc. Principals and staff agreed that this was fundamental for the student so that a package of support, developed and designed with the input of the SNAs, could be put in place around the students
- **Understanding of the role** - SNAs were more effective in school environments where their role and remit was understood and, in which, staff were able to use the SNA resources as effectively as possible for the benefit of the young people with disabilities
- **SNAs who understand the disabilities / abilities** - the most effective SNAs were often those who had an in-depth knowledge of the categories of disabilities of students that they were supporting in school. This enabled the SNA to develop appropriate supports for the young people with disabilities. It also ensured they understood the scope for independent work, that is, the SNA knew when to withdraw and foster an independent attitude within the young people with disabilities

“SNAs must have a range of qualities that enable them to deal with the vast range of situations that they are in each day. Their job is not easy and requires a great deal of flexibility and understanding to ensure that they can cope with the challenges of each day. In relation to supporting the young people with disabilities it is key that the SNA has the

patience and time to listen to the young person.” (Staff member in a special school)

6.9.2 Perspectives of SNAs

The SNAs interviewed agreed that the characteristics of an effective SNA varied between students. However, it broadly consisted of the following:

- **Flexibility** - the ability to be flexible and adaptive to any number of different situations was key to providing an effective SNA service to the students
- **Ability to support whilst building independence** - it was important to be able to support the students that SNAs worked with and help to build their independence. Where appropriate and safe, it was essential that SNAs withdrew support at appropriate times and allowed the students the opportunity to do things independently in preparation for life after school. Different schools had different approaches to dealing with this. Some had specific policies in relation to the reduction in hours of SNA support as young people with disabilities progressed through school. Other schools did have a philosophy of reducing SNA support for Senior Cycle students. However, this was done on an ad hoc basis and the scale of the reduction was determined by SEN co-ordinators within the school
- **To encourage** - encouraging the students with disabilities was seen as a key characteristic of the SNAs as they sought to prepare students for life after school. Many students suffered from low self-esteem and confidence and as a result did not set personal goals. SNAs encouraged the students to do this and supported them in their attempt to achieve their goals
- **To act as a go-between** - SNAs felt that they had a particularly important role in the life of the student in school. In particular they provided an active communication link between the student and parents of young people with disabilities, teachers and others in school

6.10 Summary

The evidence from school principals, staff and SNAs suggests that how prepared a young person is for life after school depends on a number of factors that is wider than the support provided to them in the school environment. Indeed, it is suggested that the support provided in the school environment can be influenced by other factors, such as, the category and severity of the young person’s disability and the destination they plan to progress to. This highlights that a joined up collaborative approach that engages each of key people involved in supporting a young person may be required to ensure the most appropriate support is provided when needed. However, it also raises questions about respective roles and how these should come together to provide a more holistic approach to support.

Principals, staff and SNAs also highlighted that the support required can depend on where the young person with a disability wishes to progress to. Schools would, therefore, provide different support to those that are aiming to go to Higher

Education, than to those who need support with 'fastening their coat'. SNAs were of the view that they tailored the support they provided to the specific needs, abilities and capacity of the young person they were supporting and would support them with tasks that would help them to achieve their individual goals.

This may reflect some broader issues about choice, or perhaps lack of choice, that young people with disabilities are offered because of the perception that they may lack capacity or are not perceived to have a valued social role. This reinforces the need to strike a balance between offering appropriate levels of support to young people with a disability to address their immediate needs and encouraging independence according to their capacity. Equally important is setting realistic expectations of future pathways available to each young person with a disability. So, forcing someone down a route to which they are not suited, for example, Further Education or Higher Education, is unlikely to be a good outcome for the young person with a disability.

“Progression at all costs is not necessarily a good thing” (Further Education sector representative)

This demonstrates that preparing a young person with a disability for their life after post-primary school requires forward planning and a clear, realistic plan for what is achievable and how the young person with disabilities can be supported to attain this. Some principals indicated they have a process for developing such a plan in transition year and hold review meetings to provide a holistic assessment of the young person's needs and the level of support required. However, this approach is not consistently applied in all schools. This indicates the need for a more formal process is needed and one which can be applied in all post-primary schools. It should assess, in conjunction with the young person with a disability and their parent, what their 'end goal' will be on leaving school and agree a suitable plan to achieve this.

Principals, staff and SNAs referred to a range of supports that young people with a disability may need to successfully progress. These included:

- Life skills, for example, money management
- Social/communication skills, for example, being able to interact with peers
- Emotional support, for example, being able to cope with new challenges and manage anxiety
- Educational/learning support, for example, being able to understand information provided in class and what is required of them

Principals and staff were of the view that the supports currently available in school primarily focused on educational/learning support and there is an insufficient focus on life, social and communication skills. Most principals noted that these needs are being met by the SNA on an informal basis. This highlights a lack of formal support to develop young people with a disability in these areas. This raises questions about how best to do provide this support and who is best placed to deliver this.

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There was a general consensus in the views expressed by principals, staff and SNAs, that the SNA support should be decreased in later years, where possible and safe to do so, to encourage independence. This is a formal process in some schools but not in all. This suggests the need for greater consistency and a more formal approach to how SNA support is provided, in particular, the level of support - for a young person with disabilities as they progress through school.

All principals, staff and SNAs indicated that there was scope to better define the role of the SNA to reflect what actually happens in practice. This would mean a broader remit including addressing care needs but also developing other skills including life skills. This would provide clarity for SNAs and other staff in schools, as well as for young people with disabilities and their parents.

Linked to this, is the need for regular training to be provided to SNAs to better equip them to fulfil their role. Based on current practice this would include training related to health/ care needs, for example, how to administer specific types of medication if required. Should the SNA role be further developed, additional training would be required to align with any new responsibilities. This could include, for example, approaches to developing day-to-day life skills.

7 Analysis, conclusions and key issues

7.1. Introduction

This small scale qualitative study examined how well prepared young people with disabilities are for life after they finish formal schooling. The study focused on both the post-school supports young people currently have or need in order to actively participate in and engage in these key areas of life, as well as the Special Needs Assistant supports they had in school and the level and adequacy of same in enabling them to prepare for life after school and make the necessary transition to further education/higher education, work; training or adult day services.

This study gathered evidence based on the views and experience of a range of stakeholders including the young people with disabilities, parents of young people with disabilities, school personnel including SNAs, staff from post school environments including, adult day services, Further Education and Higher Education and employers.

Given the breadth and richness of the evidence, it has been possible to triangulate across the various strands of evidence to develop an understanding of key factors influencing preparation for life in a post school environment. Whilst the strands are not necessarily consistent or mutually reinforcing, the emerging findings are robust and comprehensive. In some instances, there are similar views; in other cases, views are very different and cannot easily be reconciled. This divergence in views, in some cases, raises fundamental questions about the adequacy and appropriateness of current processes for preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments.

7.2 Context for the study

7.2.1 Introduction

This section briefly explores some important contextual issues for this study. It sets the scene for the analysis of evidence arising from the research, emerging findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The role of the SNA, as defined by the Department of Education, is quite tightly prescribed; in practice, delivery of the role is somewhat different (see 7.2.2). Whilst, SNAs may contribute to preparing young people for life after school, this takes place within a wider systemic context (see 7.2.3). As such the role played by the SNA cannot be reviewed totally in isolation.

A broad range of factors influence the preparation of young people for life after school (see 7.2.4) and the support that they need, as identified by those interviewed (see 7.2.5). Many of these apply to young people in general, though for young people with disabilities, the need for support may be magnified. It is generally accepted that all young people can experience difficulties in facing the challenge of moving to post-school environments. However, while young people with disabilities face similar challenges, it is evident, from the views expressed during this study, that the nature and extent of these challenges are complicated by a number of factors unique to young people with disabilities. These include, for example, ensuring continuity and appropriateness of support in post school environments, accessing reasonable accommodations and addressing transport requirements, for example, supporting young people to use public transport independently.

7.2.2 Role of the SNA

The role of the SNA, as defined by the Department of Education in Circular 0030/2014, sets out a fairly narrow description of duties. SNAs cater for a minority of students with disabilities who have significant need for care support in an educational context and could not otherwise attend school. SNAs are not qualified teachers. They are not allocated to teach students or provide educational support. They undertake tasks of a non-teaching nature. The SNA role definition does not extend to a specific supporting role in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school.

In practice, the role is somewhat different although experience does vary across schools. In some cases, SNAs operate to the description of duties very closely. In many cases, however, many of those interviewed indicated that the SNAs operate more flexibly and beyond the strict confines of the job description. Examples cited during the interviews include:

- SNAs taking on additional tasks in conjunction with their care role – because no-one else was doing it, for example, supporting a student with their studies, or accompanying them to a careers' event
- SNAs being required to pick up additional duties, such as, T support, break-time supervision etc.
- SNAs expanding the scope of their role themselves because of on-the-ground experience, a holistic sense of how a student develops and instinctively recognising the need to respond

Thus, the SNAs can play a role in contributing to preparing young people for life after school but do not have sole responsibility for this.

7.2.3 Preparedness for life after school – wider systemic context

Considering preparing young people for life after school, it is important to recognise that the SNA role operates within a wider systemic context. This includes different resources for supporting students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and

transition pathways from school to post school settings. Managing transitions smoothly and effectively is also important. The SNA role is an element within this matrix.

Within the school environment, various staff roles provide a range of supports for young people with disabilities. These complement teaching and learning in schools. The supports provided seek to assist young people with disabilities on their journey through the education system, as well as, to go some way to preparing them for life after school. Some of the main roles and the supports provided to young people with disabilities, include: Special Needs Assistants (SNA); Resource Teachers; and Guidance Counsellors. The details of these roles are described in Section 2.3.

7.2.4 Preparedness for life after school – influences

Preparing for life after school presents many challenges and opportunities for young people in general. Many factors have an influence. Some of these may enable and facilitate preparation; others, hinder preparation and act as barriers. The role played by SNA's in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school cannot be viewed in isolation to such factors. Some of these factors are considered in the table below.

Table 7: Influences on preparation for life after school

Factor	Influences on preparation for life after school
Young person with disability	Involvement in planning and decision making
	Aspirations / goals of the young person, related to capacity, ability, also confidence and self-esteem
Parents / family members / peer group	Perception of students' capabilities
	Perception of progression routes and expectations that may be too low or too high
Teaching and non-teaching staff in school	Perception of students' capabilities
	Perception of progression routes and expectations that may be too low or too high
School – services provision	Potential narrow focus of school services that may not address 'life course' needs of young people with disabilities
	Appropriate capacity in schools to provide support required
Accessible information for young people with disabilities/ those who support them	Information and advice on options, choices and possibilities for students with a disability
	Information and advice on resources and support, financial or otherwise, available to follow chosen pathway including impact on income support, housing etc.

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Factor	Influences on preparation for life after school
Opportunities and support available after school	Availability and accessibility, including transport, of appropriate opportunities for young people with disabilities
	Difficulties finding employment and work experience due to perceptions of employers regarding what they can offer and how they can meet the needs of young people with disabilities
	Lack of flexibility of educational institutes regarding attendance at courses, for example, attendance on a full time course may not always be possible due to nature of disability, but part time options not available
	Difficulty in accessing disability services or support and reasonable adjustments in the Higher Education sector. This may arise where resources are scarcer, for example, in Institutes of Technology or Further Education colleges

Source: RSM PACEC

7.2.5 Preparedness for life after school – supports needed

In order to get a better understanding of the role of the SNA in preparedness for life after school it was important to ascertain the views of those interviewed in this study as to what they perceived as needed to prepare young people with disabilities for life after school.

Young people with disabilities face many of the same challenges and opportunities as their peers. These are exacerbated, however, in many cases. This is due to the interaction between the nature and severity of their disability and the demands posed by complex post school environments. There was consensus among the views expressed that the supports and skills required by the general population are also required by young people with disabilities. These include developing life skills, for example, cooking, independent living, budgeting, travel etc., and learning to develop confidence. However, stakeholders were clearly of the view that it is the additional level and scale of coaching and support that a student with a disability requires that is different. This in turn leads to a need for more formalised supports and clarity on the specific role an SNA can play.

These points, particularly in relation to support needs in schools are echoed by McGuckin et al., 2013²¹ who state:

“It has been widely acknowledged that young people with disabilities with SEN, in common with their peers without SEN, need preparation

²¹ **Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs** (NCSE Research Report No.14, 2013)

within school to become more autonomous and develop self-determination skills (Harrison, 2006²²; OECD, 2011²³)”.

McGuckin et al., 2013²⁴ also emphasise the important role that schools have to play in this regard:

“Schools play a critical role in preparing students with SEN for passage to adulthood and helping these young people to acquire the necessary life skills to make a successful transition (OECD, 2011)²⁵.”

To illustrate the point more specifically, McLaughlin et al. (2001)²⁶ discuss the differences in experience of young people with disabilities, in this instance, progressing to employment:

“Whereas for typical school leavers the transition from home to independent living is exciting for disabled young people with disabilities this can often lead to a period of social isolation, loss of confidence, as well as other psychological issues. This has been shown to impact on receiving, and maintaining employment.”

Regarding the specific areas of support identified by young people with disabilities in this research study, for example in section 6.3.2, there is evidence (McLaughlin et al. 2001²⁷, (Lindsay 2010²⁸)) to support the additional challenges they face as follows:

- **Life skills/ Confidence** – many young people with disabilities become socially isolated upon leaving school, to a greater extent than the wider population, and experience issues with confidence and mental health
- **Social / communication skills** – young people with disabilities are often made to do socially isolating tasks, in the workplace, generally have low self-esteem and are met with stigma

²² Harrison, N. (2006) **The impact of negative experiences, dissatisfaction and attachment on first year undergraduate withdrawal**, in Journal of further and higher education , 30, 377-391.

²³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011) **Inclusion of students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment**, Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

²⁴ **Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs** (NCSE Research Report No.14, 2013)

²⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011) **Inclusion of students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment**, Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

²⁶ <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=ijass>

²⁷ <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=ijass>

²⁸ [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sally_Lindsay/publication/47741618_Discrimination_and_othe_r_barriers_to_employment_for_teens_and_young_adults_with_disabilities/links/558de4e308ae1ef9bab2b3b.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sally_Lindsay/publication/47741618_Discrimination_and_other_barriers_to_employment_for_teens_and_young_adults_with_disabilities/links/558de4e308ae1ef9bab2b3b.pdf)

- **Emotional support** – young people with disabilities are more likely to experience attitudinal and self-esteem issues
- **Educational / learning support** – In many cases, information about jobs is not suitably adapted for young people with disabilities
- **Support from home / parents of young people with disabilities** – Young people with disabilities can feel discouraged by family
- **Communication / collaboration between the school and the young person's next destination** – young people with disabilities do not have adequate training, for example, to prepare adequately for employment

7.3 Emerging findings from this study

7.3.1 Adequacy and appropriateness of support provided by schools in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school

There is some variation in the nature of support and skills required in school and in Further/Higher education, training, employment and adult day services. This can vary according to the nature of disability, the capacity of the young person and the preparation they require according to their post school destination. It could be argued that the supports required by young people with disabilities fall into a spectrum of need ranging from:

- Greater level of needs for support to prepare for those moving to adult day services, recognizing that de facto special schools tend to feed into adult day services
- Intermediate level of need for support to prepare for those moving to Further Education
- Lower/limited level of need for support to prepare for those moving to Higher Education who will have access to a range of support in Higher Education Institutions and are likely to be more motivated and able to engage with and seek support from Disability Services

There was considerable divergence in views among the key stakeholders about the adequacy and appropriateness of the support provided by schools in preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. Generally, staff in post school environments believed that young people with disabilities were not adequately prepared for the transition to the post school environment. To a certain extent, this belief was shared by the young people with disabilities and parents of young people with disabilities. School staff, not surprisingly, did not concur with this view and provided examples of how young people with disabilities were given a range of supports to enable a successful transition to a post school environment.

It is difficult to reconcile such widely divergent views. However, closer examination of the factors informing these views offered in this report seeks to provide a greater understanding of how these perspectives have emerged and whether any common ground is possible.

It was generally recognised among all participants that, transition supports needed to be very carefully tailored to address the needs of the young people with disabilities and the requirements and challenges posed by the post school environment. It became very evident that the adequacy and appropriateness of preparation are judged in how well and how quickly the young person with a disability could adapt to the demands posed by the post school environment. For example, how young people with a disability are expected to perform in a Higher or Further Education setting is radically different to expectations within the adult day services.

7.3.2 Experience relating to adult day services

Staff in adult day services reported that the young people were generally ill prepared for life in this post school setting. They cited examples of young people lacking basic life skills and the ability to socially interact with their peers. In particular, staff believed that the young people were overly dependent and lacking an ability to work independently and to an extent supports provided in schools and by SNAs contributed to this dependency. Young people with a disability in adult day services stated that they had not received sufficient practical support in school, including life skills, to prepare them for life in this post school environment. Parents of young people with a disability, while, generally positive about school support, were divided on whether young people with a disability had sufficient life skills to make the transition to adult day centres. School staff including SNAs, on the other hand, demonstrated an awareness about the critical importance of developing life skills and provided examples of how this was achieved, although this type of work is not strictly within the remit of the SNA role. Some schools had a policy to reduce dependence on SNA support through reduction in explicit support and encouraging young people with disabilities to become more independent in everyday activities.

7.3.3 Experience relating to Further and Higher Education

Young people with disabilities, who attended Further or Higher Education institutions, pointed out that they required more specific one to one career guidance at an early stage of their school career, which they had not received. These young people relied heavily on support from family and friends in making course choices. Staff in Further and Higher Education settings were in agreement with the views expressed by the young people with disabilities, in relation to the need for focused career guidance. In addition, staff believed that these young people required specific supports to enable them to engage with the different challenges in a radically altered teaching and learning environment.

School staff acknowledged that young people with disabilities needed particular life skills to engage fully in the post school environment. In contrast to the Higher Education and Further Education staff and the young people with disabilities, they believed that tailored SNA support did address some of these needs. However, there was an awareness among school staff that the current Senior Cycle curriculum, was not best suited to addressing the need for life skills and social skills among some young people with disabilities. The exception to this is the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. However, it is not available in all schools.

7.3.4 Experience relating to employment

Young people with disabilities, who were in employment, felt they had been ready to leave school but experienced a difficult transition to the world of work in the absence of the support network available in school. These young people reported that the support of organisations outside of school, such as, employment facilitators, was a critical factor in facilitating the transition process. School support for specific life skills, such as independent travel, an essential requirement for employment, would have been valuable according to the young people with disabilities. Employers believed that young people with disabilities received too much support in the latter stages of school. This lessened their capacity to work independently and to socially interact with their work colleagues. Employers did acknowledge, however, that some of the issues encountered by young people with disabilities could be applicable to any new employee, such as, job fit/correct skill for the role.

7.3.5 Types of support provided by SNAs and contribution to preparation for life after school

This study examined the types of support provided by SNAs to young people with disabilities in the later stages of their school career and what contribution, if any, SNAs made in the preparation of these young people for life in post school environments. There were widely divergent views among the key stakeholders about the adequacy and appropriateness of SNA support in general, and in particular, in relation to preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments.

Young people with disabilities were generally positive about the support provided by SNAs to enable them participate in education though they did not believe that the SNAs had played an active part in their preparation for life after school. The young people acknowledged that SNAs had provided valuable support for engaging in learning tasks, developing communication skills and increasing their confidence. Parents of young people with disabilities were divided about whether SNA support had a positive or negative effect in preparing these young people for life in post school environments. The majority of parents believed that SNA support had a positive effect and pointed to how SNAs had encouraged achievement among the young people with disabilities. A minority of parents believed that the young people had become overly dependent on the SNA support and, as a result, were not adequately equipped for life in post school environments.

Adult day service providers shared similar views and believed that an unhealthy dependency had emerged that resulted in the inability of young people with disabilities to perform basic tasks independently. Further and Higher Education providers believed that SNA supports principally addressed the needs of young people with disabilities **whilst in school** and had little relevance in preparing them for participation in Further or Higher Education. It was pointed out that over dependency on SNA support could result in a failure by the young people with disabilities to adjust to post school environments where considerably less support

was available. Employers did not believe that SNAs had a specific part to play in preparing young people with disabilities for employment.

School staff, including SNAs, did not share the predominant view among other stakeholders that SNAs had a minimal part, if any, to play in preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. It was acknowledged that, while the main focus of SNA support was on facilitating learning for young people with disabilities, they also made a significant contribution to the development of life skills, confidence, social and communication skills among these young people. SNAs reported that they provided support beyond physical care needs and helped to meet the emotional and social needs of young people with disabilities. SNAs provided a number of examples of this type of support including helping the young people with disabilities with day-to-day living skills, organisational skills and stress management. In some cases, SNAs carried out an informal pastoral care role and provided a level of emotional support.

- Where SNAs operate more flexibly and beyond the strict confines of the job description, this can include (as discussed in Section 7.2.2):
- Taking on additional tasks in addition in conjunction with their care role – because no-one else was doing it
- Being required to pick up additional duties or volunteering to take on additional tasks as no-one else is available to do these
- Expanding the scope of their role themselves because of on-the-ground experience

Critically the type of supports described by SNAs and others **fall outside the official Department of Education and Skills job designation**, which clearly states that SNAs are principally responsible for addressing the care needs of young people with disabilities.

The additional supports provided by SNAs in the area of life skills and other additional tasks, are entirely voluntary and considered as additional to their existing workload. This can raise various issues including:

- What is in the best interests of the young person, if the SNA is being required to undertake tasks that encourage dependency? Some schools were aware of the risk of developing over dependency among the young people with disabilities and had initiated policies to address this issue through a reduction of explicit SNA support in Senior Cycle and a focus on encouraging greater independence among these young people. In other schools, however, this approach was implemented on an ad hoc basis and so we cannot assume that this is a consistent practice across the majority of schools.

- If the SNA is appropriately qualified to undertake additional tasks, for example, those that stray into teaching and learning, and implications for relationships with those who are qualified, or who regulate qualifications?
- If the SNA did not take on additional tasks who would? How is the SNA taking on the tasks impacting on the effectiveness of resources within and outside school?
- Effective use of resources, if an SNA is being used to carry out duties for which they are not recruited or are not in keeping with their role, is this best use of their time?

7.3.6 Key issues in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school

The divergence in views among stakeholders about the adequacy of existing school supports in preparing young people with disabilities and, specifically, the SNA role in this process raises a number of critical issues:

- School capacity to adequately address the complex requirements of preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments
- The role of SNAs in preparatory process given official DES designation of their role combined with view among many stakeholders that either this preparatory role is not within the SNA remit or that the current support provided by SNAs in this area is inadequate
- Who should take overall responsibility for preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments?

It is fairly evident from the views expressed, that there is a certain amount of dissatisfaction among key stakeholders, apart from school staff, about the adequacy and appropriateness of existing arrangements for preparing young people with disabilities for life in post school environments.

Given this, the role played by SNAs in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school cannot be viewed in isolation to other critical factors which impact on an individual's level of readiness for life after school. This was highlighted in some of the views expressed during the research, for example, the need for access to suitably qualified Guidance Counsellors in post-primary and special schools²⁹ to explore future options in post school environments.

It is also evident that while SNAs can contribute to the preparation process, responsibility for this is not solely within the remit of the SNAs. It appears that while SNAs in some schools foster life skills and independence skills among the young people with disabilities, this input is not considered adequate or effective by staff in

²⁹ Special schools because they have been deemed primarily as National Schools(although some are now doing subjects beyond the National School curriculum) do not currently have Guidance Counsellors posts sanctioned by the Department of Education and Skills

post school environments in preparing these young people for the challenges in their new setting.

The report has shown that, in many cases, SNAs do contribute to this preparation process. In doing this, some of those consulted were of the view that they are in fact operating beyond the parameters of their role as currently designated. Further, the additional support is not consistent or standardised across the SNA offering. A key finding from this report is the need to address these issues and attempt to form a consistent yet effective offering across SNA provision. This may be achieved through designating a wider role and remit for the SNA and thus one which is standardised. Alternatively, these supports or preparatory work should be provided from another source within the system.

Curricular inflexibility in Senior Cycle, apart from Leaving Certificate Applied and the lack of resources sometimes resulted in an overly academic focus when a more practical course would have been more appropriate for some young people with disabilities.

Bridging the gap between schools and post school settings is considered to be essential in developing effective transitions between settings. However, there was limited evidence that a systematic approach to this issue was in place apart from outreach activities of Further and Higher Education institutions and some work experience programmes.

It is generally recognised that support from home is a critical factor in enabling a successful transition to post school settings for all young people but it is particularly crucial for young people with disabilities. While this factor was mentioned by key stakeholders, there was little evidence that these stakeholders had made conscious efforts to support input from home into this decision making process.

7.3.7 Areas for further consideration – school and system level

Based on the views expressed during this study, it is evident that ensuring adequate preparation for young people with disabilities in post school settings requires action at both the level of the school and the wider educational system. Difficult questions remain to be addressed including what part, if any, SNAs should play in the preparation of young people with disabilities for life in post school environments. Circular 0030/2014 states:

A key aspiration for pupils with special needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults insofar as this is possible. There is a need to balance the support provided in schools with each pupil's right to acquire personal independent living skills, the assistive SNA support

which is given to them should always be at the minimum level required to meet the care needs of the pupil³⁰

It could be argued, however, as school staff have, that SNAs could play an expanded and more proactive role in the preparation process focusing on the development of life skills, increasing capacity for carrying out tasks independently and fostering ability in social interaction with peers. This would require a number of significant changes in policy and practice:

- Department of Education and Skills designation of care needs to be expanded to include further duties such as social and emotional support and developing relevant life skills
- SNAs would require substantial continuing professional development to carry out this expanded role effectively
- Bridging the gap between schools and post school settings also requires attention
- Curricular flexibility in Senior Cycle is also required

7.4 Issues for further investigation in the future

7.4.1. The SNA scheme

The stakeholders interviewed identified a number of areas, based on their current understanding of the role of SNAs that might merit further consideration or discussion among relevant Government Departments and agencies. It may be helpful to note these here as reflective of the views and opinions of the various stakeholders included in the research.

7.4.2 Fostering a consistent understanding of the role of SNAs

There may be scope to review the job description and duties assigned to the SNAs to ensure they accurately reflect the role they can and, in some cases, already do fulfil in supporting young people with disabilities for life after school. This would be done in the wider context of encouraging greater independence for young people with disabilities.

To specifically help young people with disabilities to prepare for life after school, the description of the role might be re-focused to include supports that assist with independence – for example:

- Greater role in preparation for transition to post school settings in the Senior Cycle. This is likely to involve SNAs supporting young people with disabilities as they focus on life after school and developing the range of skills required for that
- Greater role and involvement in planning for movement to post-school settings. This would be under the direction of schools and adult day services

³⁰ Op. cit. Department of Education and Skills, Circular 0030/2014

in particular. It would take into account that there are already existing supports, such as Guidance Counsellors, Learning Support and Resource Teachers in place to assist with transition to other post school settings. This would involve the SNAs becoming more closely involved in the development and delivery of individual tailored plans to support young people in progressing from school to adult day services

- Accompanying young people with disabilities on familiarization visits to colleges, adult day services, workplaces, etc., particularly in the case of SNAs in special schools

7.4.3 Training and Continuous Professional Development

It emerged from the research that it may be helpful to conduct a training needs analysis for SNAs to identify appropriate skills, qualifications and other Continuous Professional Development that may be required to deliver an effective support service, taking into account the other roles and system in which the SNA will operate. This could also take into account specific situations that SNAs may encounter in schools, for example: working with students who have medical conditions as well as disabilities that might require administration of medication, knowledge of how to perform first aid in an emergency situation and dealing with young people with behavioural / emotional difficulties.

Following this analysis, it might be feasible to consider development of a training plan to ensure that SNAs are provided with the training and development required to fulfil their role in a timely fashion and, also, to identify resources to support the delivery of the training plan.

7.4.4 The impact of school ethos

It emerged in the course of the research that the individual school ethos had a significant impact on how the SNA supports were deployed, and in turn, how this affected the part played by the SNA in preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. Examples include:

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- Inclusive ethos
- Nurturing/supportive environment
- Holistic approach to supporting young people with disabilities
- Mutual respect and understanding of teaching and non-teaching roles
- SNAs as an integral part of the school support for young people with disabilities
- SNAs actively involved in personal and transition planning for the individual student

It may be worthwhile, in the course of any review of good practice, to capture and collate evidence of good practice in relation to school ethos and the impact, if any, this has on SNAs and the support provided to young people with disabilities in schools. (This is linked to the point about sharing and promoting good practice in the next section).

7.5 SNA within the wider school support framework

7.5.1 Context

The SNA is just one element within a wider support framework available in school settings. As such, it is impossible to consider the role completely in isolation. This is further emphasised by the fact that the research demonstrated the extent to which many stakeholders found it very difficult to accurately disaggregate the supports provided by the SNA from those provided by others within the school setting. It may therefore be helpful to note some of the more broad-ranging issues that were raised in the course of the interviews, some of which are already committed for addressing under the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities** and others which may merit some further consideration. These are summarised below.

7.5.2 Transitions

It is noted the importance of transition planning is widely recognised and as being progressed through the **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities**, in relation to access to further education, training and employment. It may be helpful to explore the need for transition planning to begin early in the post-primary school career of students with disabilities to adequately prepare them for life after school. This transition planning can be incorporated into a collaboratively developed IEP involving the young person, their family, resource teacher and Guidance Counsellor, and could also include the SNA where appropriate.

This research has identified in particular, views on a lack of preparedness for young people with disabilities who transition to adult day services in terms of life skills. Views and experiences refer to the value and benefits of work experience and support that is more practically focused. Whilst study participants consider that the Leaving Certificate Applied goes some way to address what is needed, it is not available in all schools. It may be helpful to consider possible mechanisms for enhancing life-skills training within the school setting, where appropriate and relevant. Reviewing the ways in which young people with disabilities currently transfer to adult day services may be helpful in identifying areas for future attention.

7.5.3 Preparation for Education, Training and Work

The various stakeholders interviewed underlined the importance of effective guidance counselling in helping to prepare young people with disabilities for life after school. This is an area for action already committed for development in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy. This support is important both in context of mainstream and special schools.

7.5.4 Understanding the support landscape

Given, the wider support context in place in school settings, including and beyond the individual role of the SNA, and in light of the fact that many stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of the parameters of each of the support roles, it may be helpful to carry out an exercise to map the areas of need (to prepare young people with disabilities for life after school) against the supports currently provided in school by SNAs and others (including, other school staff, Guidance Counsellors, home/family, etc.) and through the Senior Cycle curriculum.

Such a mapping exercise could take into account both in school and post school supports and the interaction between the spectrum of support needs required by young people, the various pathways that young people will follow and the specific demands of the post school environment. This would provide a useful framework setting out existing supports as well as clarity on roles and involvement in preparing young people for life after school, including in particular the role of the SNA in this regard. It would also identify gaps in support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school and inform any action plan to address same.

If such a mapping exercise were carried out, it would then be helpful to develop a plan to address the gaps in support for preparing young people with disabilities for life after school. This would take into account responsibilities for delivering the supports, identification of individuals/organisations who are suitably equipped to deliver the supports and resource implications (funding, staff, training, etc.). This is likely to include a range of agencies and stakeholders rather than be limited to the SNAs, as preparation for life after school is not solely the remit of the SNAs.

7.5.5 Sharing and promoting good practice

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Where good practice is identified, in terms of preparing young people with disabilities for life after school, it would be helpful to consider ways of sharing and promoting this good practice as a means of building capacity within the system. Some of this could be about considering ways to improve linkages and communication both within schools, and between the schools and relevant post-school settings.