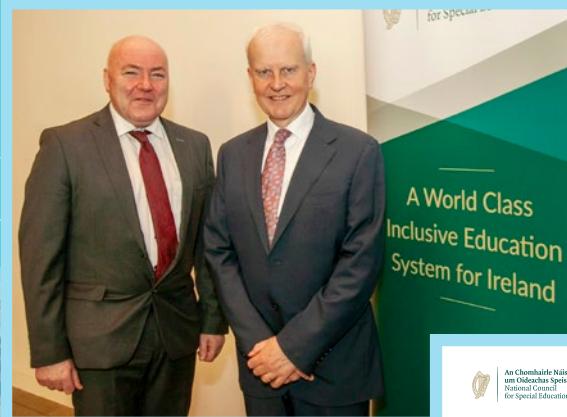




NCSE Annual Report 2024



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

NCSE Relate

A Regulation-First Approach to Reframing Behaviour
and Supporting Student Engagement and Participation

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National Council for Special Education

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Contents

NCSE Chairperson's Report to Ministers	2
About us: The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	8
Our vision	8
Our mission	8
Our values	8
Our function	9
Main Achievements in 2024	12
Strategic Goal 1 – Service Delivery	15
1.1 Introduction	17
1.2 Provision of information and support to students and parents	19
1.3 Regional Team Services to Support Students, Parents and Schools	25
1.4 Student Placement and Transitions	31
1.5 Implementation of the Educational Therapy Support Service	34
1.6 Assessment of Need	43
Strategic Goal 2 – Research, Policy and Practice	47
2.1 Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Special Classes	49
2.2 Programme of Evidence-Informed Practice and Professional Learning to Support the Inclusion of Students in School Communities	50
2.3 Consultation and Engagement with stakeholders	65
2.4 NCSE Research Programme	68
Strategic Goal 3 – Our Staff – Development, Support and Leadership	77
3.1 Introduction	79
3.2 Workforce Planning and Recruitment	79
3.3 Staff Engagement and Professional Development	81
3.4 NCSE Communications and Organisational Culture	83
3.5 NCSE Systems and Organisational Expansion	85
Strategic Goal 4 – Organisation Support and Development	87
4.1 Introduction	89
4.2 Total Quality Management – Operational Excellence	89
4.3 NCSE Communications	90
4.4 ICT and Data Management	92
4.5 Corporate Governance and Code of Practice	94
4.6 The Council of the NCSE	101
Appendices	107
Appendix 1 – NCSE Staffing	108
Appendix 2 – Statistical Information on Allocations and Special Classes for School Years 2013-14 to 2023-24	109
Appendix 3 – Glossary of Acronyms Used	112
Appendix 4 – Statistical Information on Special Classes and Special Schools	113
Appendix 5 – Infographic on Main NCSE Statistics	114

NCSE Chairperson's Report to Ministers

June 2025

Helen McEntee, TD
Minister for Education
Department of Education

Michael Moynihan, TD
Minister of State with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion
Department of Education

Dear Ministers,

I am pleased to present you with the annual report for 2024 of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in line with the requirements of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004.

2024 was another significant year of growth for the NCSE and saw the completion of its strategic expansion, building on the initial organisational review work and commencement of recruitment in 2023. One-hundred-and-fifty new posts have been created across a wide range of roles. This included the appointment of two specialist leads, 14 team managers and 32 advisers, 65 special education needs organisers (SENOs) to reinforce our ability to deliver the support required in key areas.

Our primary function is to plan and coordinate the provision of education supports for children with special educational needs, so they are supported to achieve better outcomes in their education. At the end of the 2023-24 school year, over 21,000 SNA posts, up from 19,400 at the end of the previous school year, were allocated to schools to support students. There was a total of 2,922 special classes, up from 2,549 at the end of the 2022-23 school year, in mainstream schools with places available for 18,088 students, up from 15,844 from the previous year. There were 3,360 special class teachers, up from 2,919 in 2023-24. Over 8,784 students, up from 8,424 in 2023-24, were enrolled in special schools supported by the NCSE at the end of 2023-24 school year, with 1,392 special school teachers, up from 1,340 in 2023-24, in place.

The NCSE provided a range of materials and resources to support parents, teachers and schools through the summer programme. The NCSE facilitated three training webinars for the programme, which were attended by over 600 teachers and school leaders. A summer programme padlet was created to supply online resources to teachers and further home-based resources were made available for students with more complex needs unable to access the school-based programme.

The important new Educational Therapy Support Service was announced in June 2024. It aims to see occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and behaviour practitioners work alongside teachers in the classrooms. Its two strands of delivery are:

sustained in-school therapy (SIT); a collaborative partnership in school with teachers; and regional therapy (RT), providing a learning pathway of support for teachers. Over 780 teachers attended the introductory webinar on SIT. Twenty-two schools were offered SIT in 2024 with a further 212 on the panel. The NCSE ran 20 teacher professional learning (TPL) events for the schools receiving SIT that were attended by 388 teachers.

The NCSE initiated a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) support model on a pilot basis in September 2024 involving over 80 teachers in 44 schools. UDL is a framework to improve teaching and learning for all students by offering choice and some flexibility. The launch event was attended by a school leader and two teachers from each of the 44 participating schools. The NCSE supports participating schools with a UDL facilitator, seminars, in-school support, drop-in clinics and professional learning communities. An external evaluation of the model has been commissioned and will run for the pilot's duration.

The NCSE Visiting Teacher Service continued to provide support to children who are deaf/hard of hearing and also those who are blind/visually impaired. Sixteen visiting teachers provided support to almost 1,400 blind/visually impaired children and 32 visiting teachers provided support to over 5,000 children. In April 2024, the NCSE, alongside the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf, co-hosted the European Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf (FEAPDA) Congress in the Grand Hotel, Malahide. Hundreds of delegates from around the world attended.

A key strategic goal for the NCSE is to provide Ministers with independent, expert and evidence-informed policy advice. The NCSE published its policy advice paper *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society* on special schools and special classes in January 2024, after engagement with the Department of Education. To support implementation of the policy advice, the DE completed an application to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusion (EASNIE) for funding under its Technical Support Instrument (TSI). The steering group¹ overseeing the policy advice met the TSI of EASNIE in 2024 and Ireland was paired with our European counterparts in Finland to progress an assessment of the necessary challenges for inclusion across both countries. A joint project has been established that aims to support us in identifying key objectives and plan actions for promoting equitable learning opportunities, improving educational outcomes and increasing access to mainstream education for all children and students.

Our research programme progressed throughout 2024, with fieldwork on several commissioned projects advancing over the year. The first report from the study on the impact of COVID-19 for students with special educational needs was published, with a sequel report completed and approved in December 2024. The Evaluation of the NCSE's Frontline Services, commissioned in 2022, was finalised and approved in late 2024 and will be published in 2025. Its findings were presented at our 2024 research conference and we look forward to sharing these reports with your Department.

The NCSE's new Practice-Based Research Programme continued in 2024. Thirteen schools were supported by four Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), including eight post-primary, four primary and one special school. An evaluation of the pilot began in 2024 to be

¹ A group representing school unions, representative and management bodies, NCSE and DE personnel.

completed in 2025. A fifth HEI joined the pilot in late 2024 and included a further seven schools. Following completion of the programme review, other HEIs and schools will be invited to participate.

The annual research conference was held in November 2024 at the Gibson Hotel, Dublin, with over 100 delegates attending in-person and 117 registered for the online livestream. The theme, The Progressive Realisation of an Inclusive Education System in Ireland: The new NCSE and Vision 2026, was discussed by a range of national and international experts. Presentations were well-received and included contributions from Irish, UK, US and European academics as well as the Council's chief executive John Kearney outlining progress with the NCSE's expansion and our vision for a world class inclusive education system for Ireland.

In addition to providing you with an annual report under the EPSEN Act, I am also required under the 2016 Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies to report as follows:

- ▶ The NCSE is not a commercial State body. We have no subsidiaries, joint ventures or shareholdings. No commercially significant developments affected the NCSE in 2024. We do not anticipate any such developments.
- ▶ The NCSE's financial position is as disclosed in our 2024 annual accounts which are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. These accounts, when audited, are submitted separately to you under Section 29 of the EPSEN Act and include, as required, my confirmations to you on the NCSE System of Internal Controls and the required governance statement and board members' report.
- ▶ The NCSE adheres to Circular 25/2016 for standards and timelines in responding to Oireachtas members' queries. In 2025, the NCSE will publish responses to Oireachtas members' queries that do not pertain to individual students or contain personal information.
- ▶ The NCSE has agreed policy and procedures for dealing with protected disclosures in line with the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. This was amended and published in Q2 2024 in respect of the Amendment Act 2022 and further training has been provided to staff. Training on protected disclosures is now also a mandatory part of induction for new staff. No issues were raised under this procedure in 2024.
- ▶ The NCSE Council completed an evaluation of the NCSE performance by reference to the annual plan and budget in December 2024.
- ▶ The NCSE has adopted the 2016 Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and continues to be fully compliant with all aspects of it following an internal review of our compliance with the Code in 2024. In this context, I confirm that:
 - All appropriate procedures for financial reporting, tax compliance, internal audit, travel, property acquisition, and asset disposals have been carried out.
 - The NCSE is adhering to Government policy on public procurement and implementing our current corporate procurement plan which was revised in 2024. We identified non-compliance with guidelines with one supplier in 2024 and have disclosed this detail in our statement of internal control in our annual accounts.

- The NCSE is adhering to the relevant aspects and procedures of the public spending code.
- The NCSE carried out an appropriate assessment of principal risks, including a description of these risks and, where appropriate, associated mitigation measures and strategies.
- The NCSE Council members comply with the NCSE Code of Business Conduct for Members of State Boards.
- The NCSE employees comply with the Code of Behaviour for Civil Servants.
- Salaries payable to the chief executive and all employees comply with Government policy.
- No directors' fees are payable to NCSE Council members. Individual Council members' expenses are detailed in the governance statement published separately to this report.
- The NCSE complies with the guidelines for the appraisal and management of capital expenditure proposals.
- The NCSE complies with Government travel policy requirements.
- The NCSE expects no significant post-balance sheet events.
- As of 31 December 2024, the Council has six (46 per cent) female and seven (54 per cent) male members. Its gender balance is in line with requirements outlined in the EPSEN Act and meets the Government target of a minimum of 40 per cent representation of each gender in the membership of state boards.
- The NCSE is committed to the promotion of diversity and inclusion throughout the organisation.

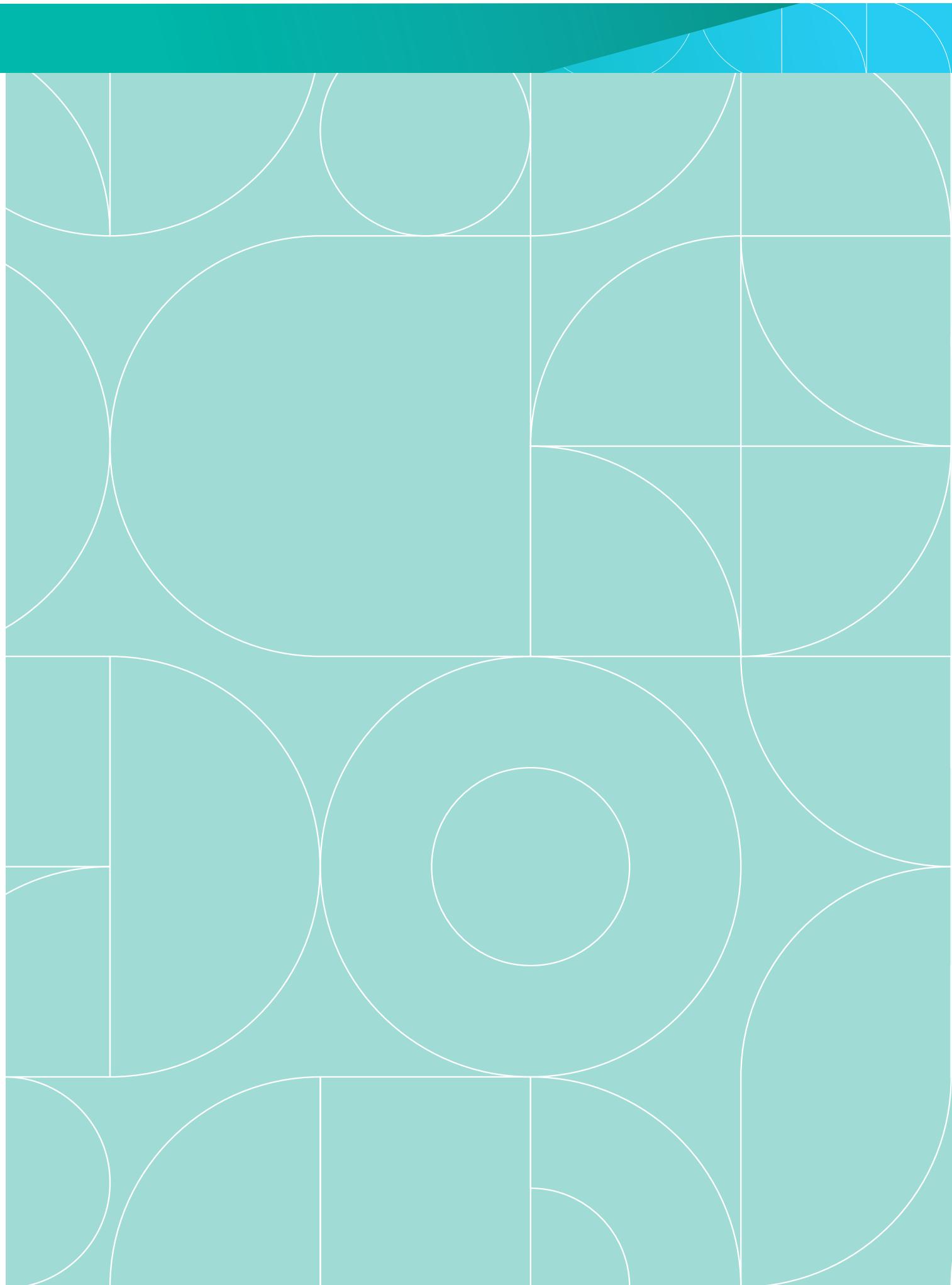
Further confirmations of compliance with the requirements of the code are set out in section 4.5 of the Annual Report.

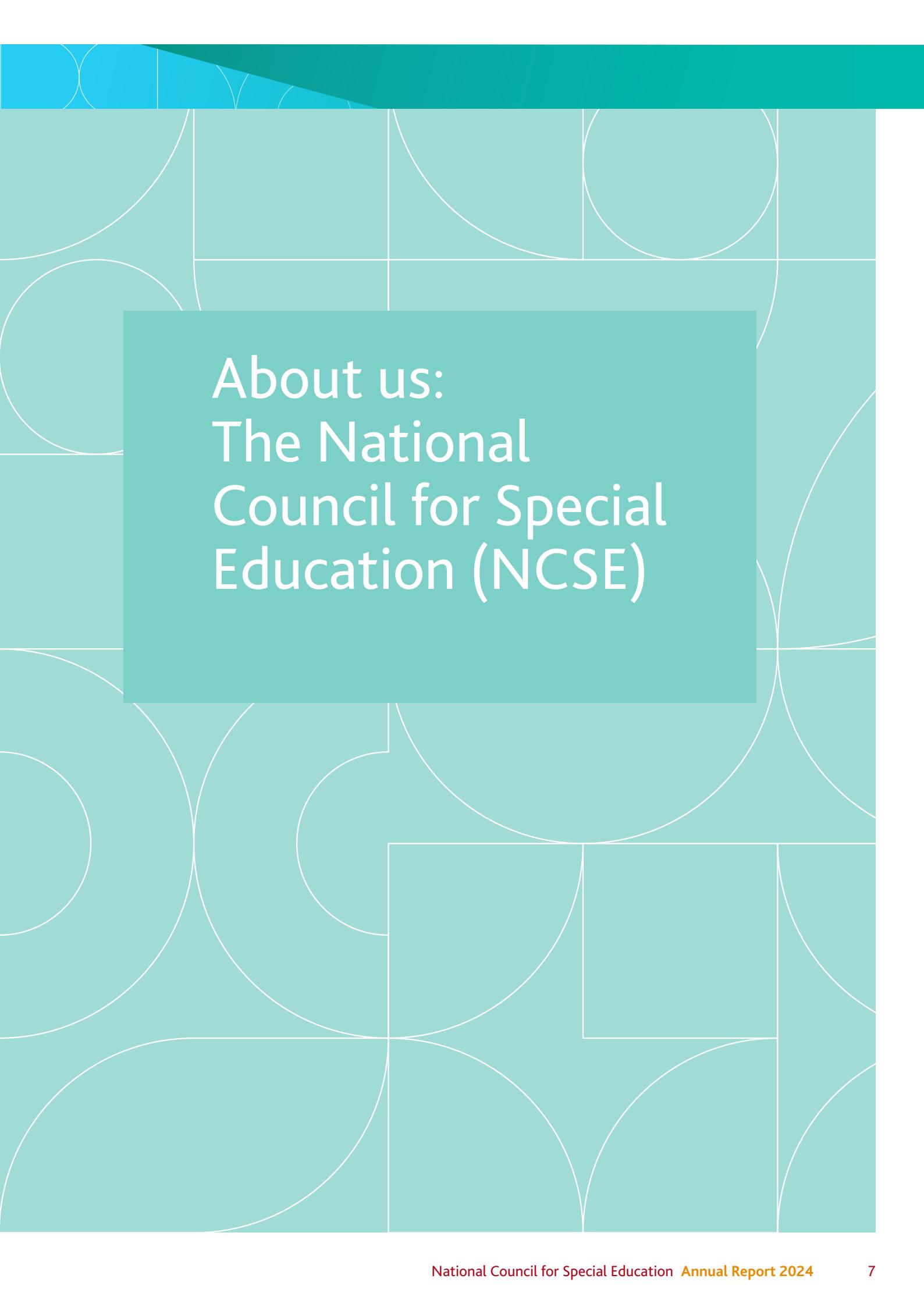
This Annual Report identifies the main achievements for 2024 along with activities undertaken in pursuance of our four strategic goals for the year. The NCSE can, if required, provide any further information or clarification to you or your officials.

Finally, I would like to thank you both and your officials for the support and positive engagement with the Council and staff throughout the year. We look forward to continuing the constructive relationship that has been in place for many years, so that we can always prioritise the needs of children and young people with special needs.

Yours sincerely

Dr Fergal Lynch
Chairperson, National Council for Special Education





About us: The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

About us: The National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

Our Vision

The NCSE's vision is for a world class inclusive education system for Ireland in which children and adults with special educational needs are supported to achieve better outcomes in their education to enable them to reach their potential.

Our Mission

The NCSE will drive the realisation of an inclusive education with integrated research, policy and practice. Skilled and committed staff will work with students, schools, and communities to provide access to quality learning and opportunities.

Our Values

1. Person-centred: children and adults with special educational needs and their families are at the centre of what the NCSE does.
2. Inclusion-focused: inclusion guides the NCSE beliefs and actions.
3. Equity and equality-focused: the NCSE allocates existing and additional resources equitably and fairly to schools in line with the needs of students and within Department of Education policy.
4. Evidence-informed: the NCSE bases policy advice on research evidence, national and international best practice, consultation with our stakeholders and expert input.
5. Expert-led: the NCSE is an expert source of valuable information, guidance and support for parents and schools as well as supporting continuing professional development for education practitioners.
6. Consultation-focused: the NCSE engages in regular and meaningful consultation with stakeholders.

Our Function

In striving to achieve this vision, several activities arise from the NCSE functions as set out in Section 20 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004. Specifically, these include:

- ▶ Planning and coordinating the provision of education supports for children with special educational needs.
- ▶ Conducting and commissioning research.
- ▶ Advising the Minister for Education on policy for special education.
- ▶ Disseminating information, including best practice, on special education to parents, schools and other interested persons.
- ▶ Consulting voluntary bodies to ensure their knowledge and expertise inform the development of NCSE policy.
- ▶ Reviewing and advising on educational provision for adults with disabilities.

The NCSE's Statement of Strategy 2023-26 was approved by Minister for Education Norma Foley in March 2024. Four strategic goals guided the work in 2024 and are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: NCSE Statement of Strategy 2023-26, Strategic Goals

Goal 1: Service Delivery

Provide students, school communities and parents with professional coordinated services and specialist support provision relevant to the best outcomes for students.

Goal 2: Research, Policy and Practice

Develop and provide expert policy advice, practice and professional learning programmes that are evidence-informed and underpinned by the latest national and international research and expert input.

Goal 3: Our Staff – Development, Support and Leadership

Develop a progressive workplace culture in collaboration with staff to embed effective leadership and best practice.

Goal 4: Organisation Support and Development

Develop a corporate identity grounded in the principles of operational excellence, responsiveness and innovation with best practice in governance.

The structure of this Annual Report is guided by the Statement of Strategy and related actions under each goal are presented here.

Organisational Structure

Chief Executive Officer and Senior Management

The chief executive generally manages, and controls staff, administration and Council business as set out in section 24 of the EPSEN Act, 2004. Regular day-to-day management, control and direction of the NCSE are the responsibility of the chief executive officer and senior management team.



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education



John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer



Pillar 1
Helen Walsh
Principal Officer
Inclusion and
Education Support
Services



Pillar 2
Andrew Torrence
Principal Officer
Service Delivery
Support (SDS)



Pillar 3
Trevor Jordan
Principal Officer
People Support,
Development and
Transformation



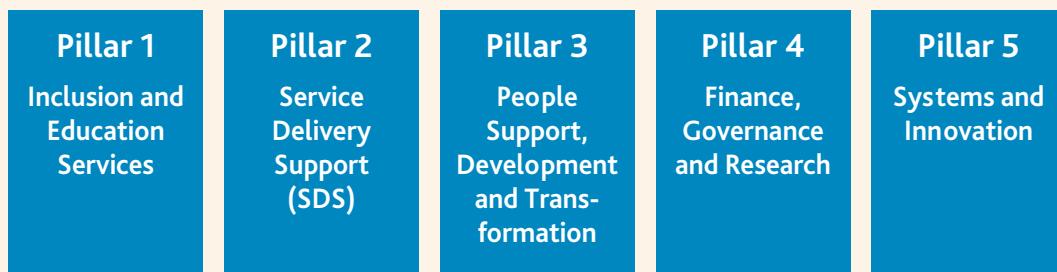
Pillar 4
Jennifer Doran
Principal
Officer Finance,
Governance and
Research



Pillar 5
Andy Bogie
Principal Officer
Systems and
Innovation

NCSE Pillars

The NCSE is divided into five separate pillars, a summary of which is below.



Pillar 1. Inclusion and Education Services: this pillar ensures delivery of a professional and coordinated service aligned with students, school communities and parents. It provides evidence-based advice to the staff and broader organisation relating to special education service provision.

Pillar 2. Service Delivery Support (SDS): this pillar supports implementation of inclusion and education support services (IESS) and thus allows pillar 1 to focus efforts on frontline service delivery.

Pillar 3. People Support, Development and Transformation: this pillar ensures staff can avail of professional support services to deliver a positive people experience. It maintains consistent and coherent engagement at appropriate strategic levels and ensures the workforce has the required skills and resources to deliver future business strategy.

Pillar 4. Finance, Governance and Research: this pillar ensures financial decisions and budgeting requirements are managed effectively for the NCSE's internal and external affairs. It manages the NCSE's corporate governance framework and compliance across the organisation. In addition, it manages the commissioned and in-house programme of research and evaluation and is responsible for developing a new practice-based research programme for teachers.

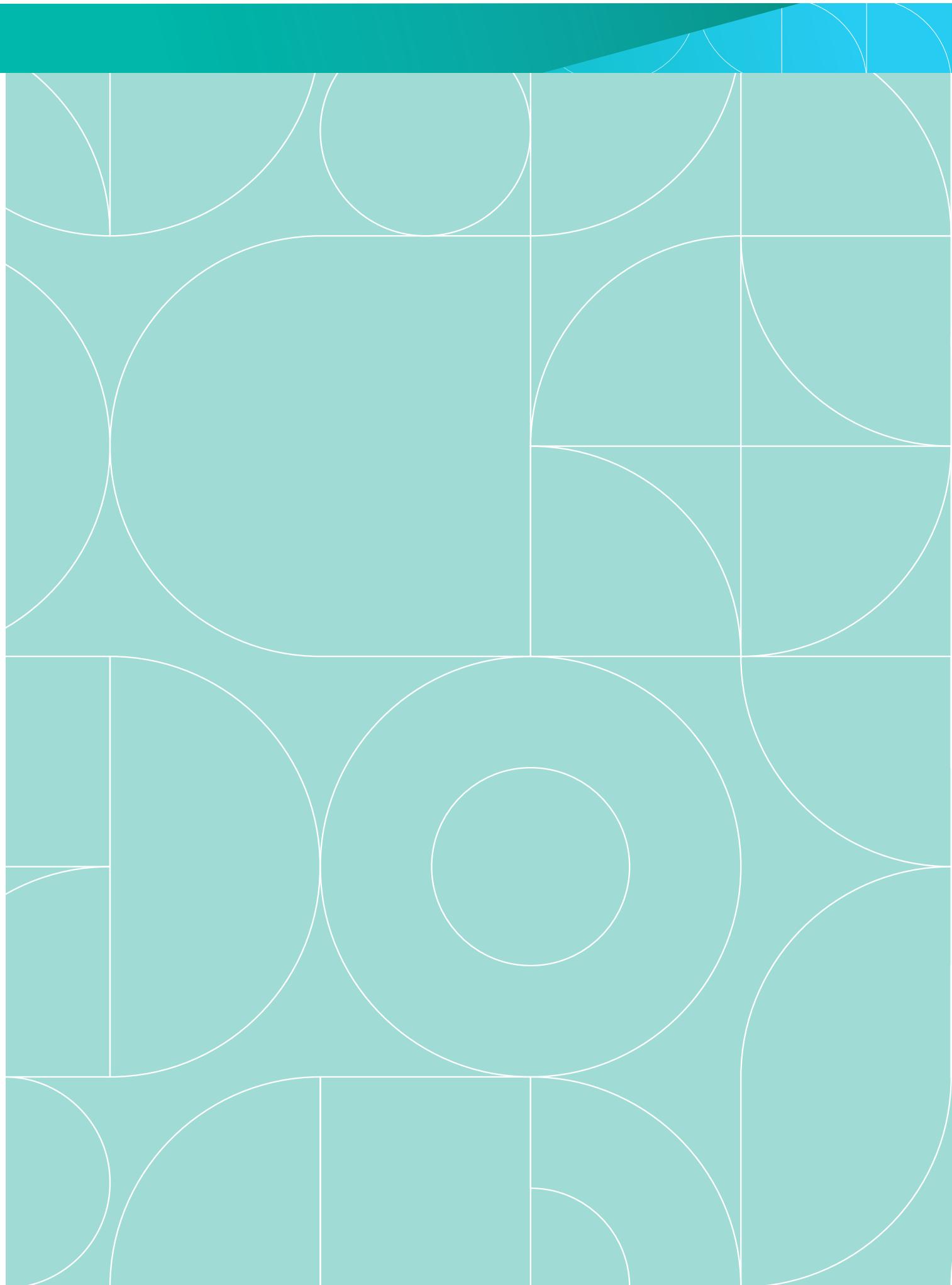
Pillar 5. Systems and Innovation: this pillar ensures the NCSE is equipped with the capability to properly manage organisational data activity. The division will manage data and provide oversight for records management, manage data analytics as well as forecast, plan and innovate in order to meet the NCSE's future technology needs and the future demands of the sector.

Main Achievements in 2024

Some of the NCSE's main 2024 achievements are summarised below.

- ▶ The Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS), established in 2024, will see therapists and behaviour practitioners working alongside teachers in classrooms to design and deliver interventions for students with various needs.
- ▶ The NCSE's expansion continued in 2024 with the appointment of 173 new staff members, primarily frontline operational staff. It also saw the introduction of several new roles with two national coordinators, a national development lead for sensory, an educational technologist and a comhordaitheoir thionscadal na Gaeilge appointed.
- ▶ At the end of the 2023-24 school year, there were 2,922 special classes in mainstream schools with places available for 18,088 students.
- ▶ 8,784 students were enrolled in NCSE-supported special schools at the end of 2023-24 school year, aided by 1,392 teachers and 3,194 SNAs.
- ▶ There were 22,575 SNA posts supporting student care needs, up from just over 20,787 at the end of December 2024.
- ▶ At the end of the 2023-24 school year, 13,232 applications for additional supports for students with special educational needs were processed under two allocation schemes:
 - Almost 6,000 new applications for school transport.
 - Over 7,200 new applications for assistive technology/special equipment.
- ▶ Under the SNA exceptional review process, 569 schools applied for a review of the allocation by end of the 2023-24 school year, with 361 receiving an increased allocation, equivalent to 348 SNA posts.
- ▶ The NCSE provided a programme of teacher professional learning (TPL) seminars (a mix of online and in-person) in 2024. Over 5,272 school leaders from around the State attended the 221 seminars held.
- ▶ The NCSE continued to provide a national SNA training programme with UCD. A fourth cohort of 831 students graduated in 2024. The course is accredited as a level 6 diploma in inclusive school support.
- ▶ Support for 22 schools under the sustained in-school therapy (SIT) support service began in September 2024. Two-hundred-and-seventy-three contacts were made with schools from September to December 2024 and 388 teachers attended 20 SIT TPL events.
- ▶ In 2024, the Visiting Teacher Service provided support to 1,380 blind/visually impaired children (16 WTE teachers) and over 5,248 deaf/hard of hearing children (32 WTE teachers).
- ▶ The NCSE Behaviour Framework-NCSE Relate was finalised. The 47 special schools involved in the pilot received behaviour practitioner support.

- ▶ The annual NCSE research conference was held in the Gibson Hotel in November 2024 on the theme: The Progressive Realisation of an Inclusive Education System in Ireland: The new NCSE and Vision 2026.
- ▶ The NCSE Corporate Procurement Plan 2024-26 was completed.
- ▶ Green and yellow belt training on Lean processes and principles was rolled out across NCSE's management structure.
- ▶ The NCSE staff conference was held in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise, Co Laois, on the theme: Quality Relationships and Quantity Services.
- ▶ A new NCSE intranet launched in 2024 as a platform for communication and knowledge-sharing across the organisation.
- ▶ The NCSE co-hosted the 27th Joint FEAPDA Congress in Malahide, Dublin, attended by delegates from around the world.
- ▶ In 2024 the NCSE introduced a new post-primary seminar, Supporting Inclusive Learning for Students with Down Syndrome. This one-day joint seminar between Down Syndrome Ireland and the NCSE offered insights and strategies into supporting the learning of post-primary students with the condition.
- ▶ A bespoke training programme for new special schools was developed to include a three-day training school closure for all staff including special needs assistants (SNAs).



Strategic Goal 1:

Service Delivery

Strategic Goal 1 – Service Delivery

Provide students, school communities and parents with professional coordinated services and specialist support provision relevant to the best outcomes for students.

The NCSE sets out five key objectives and 16 related actions under Strategic Goal 1, Service Delivery, in its Statement of Strategy 2023-26.

Goal 1 – Objectives and Actions

Objectives	Actions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide advice, information and support for parents, and students to maximise their educational opportunities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare, implement, and deliver timely parental and student engagement at local and regional team level through consistent quality assured messaging. 2. Develop, diversify and improve frontline services delivery and engagement with parents and students in line with enhanced Customer Charter and Total Quality Management standards of operational excellence. 3. Provide the logistical, communicative and referral support required to ensure regional teams are enabled to engage effectively in line with national policy.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Develop, deliver and review standardised, coordinated regional team services within each local community to support students, parents and school communities to enhance the educational participation, learning experience and outcomes for students 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen and unify regional standards for frontline delivery of NCSE services. 2. Deliver an equitable suite of NCSE services to strengthen student learning and educational outcomes. 3. Provide the logistical, communicative and referral support required to ensure regional teams are enabled to engage effectively in line with national policy. 4. Provide relevant data, information and available resources and supports to school communities.

Objectives	Actions
3. Plan for the provision and review of suitable student placement and seamless transitions together with parents, schools and stakeholders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Utilise, analyse, and prepare relevant data to prepare for student placement and transition at regional and national level. 2. Develop a framework and guidelines to support school communities in providing access to specialist and mainstream delivery for their student community. 3. Apply high level modelling to inform forward planning for future developments in primary, post-primary and special school sectors.
4. Develop a wraparound support service in schools as part of the National Therapy Support Service ²	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide a world class therapy service in line with internationally and nationally informed practice. 2. Widen and strengthen ongoing service provision of therapy on a national level. 3. Monitor and report on implementation of support services under therapy.
5. Comply with statutory obligations under the Disability Act 2005 by working with all stakeholders in response to receiving assessment of need (AoN) related referrals to assist in completing the HSE's assessment of need	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support high quality consistent delivery of AoN-related services nationally. 2. Develop continuity of service of AoN adviser support at national delivery level. 3. Coordinate and support delivery of AoN logistical services.

1.1 Introduction

The NCSE plans, coordinates and reviews provision of additional education supports for schools that enrol students with special educational needs in line with Department of Education policy.

Each year over 4,000 school communities can apply to their locally-based NCSE special educational needs organiser (SENO) for a variety of resources depending on student needs. These resources include the following:

² The National Therapy Support Service was previously referred to as the School Inclusion Model (SIM) while it was rolled out as a pilot project in two regional areas.

- ▶ SNA (special needs assistant) support through the SNA Review (SNAR) process.
- ▶ Assistive technology/specialist equipment, and/or
- ▶ School transport arrangements for students with additional needs.

Most students with special educational needs are now educated in mainstream classes. Provision ranging from full-time enrolment in the latter to full-time enrolment in special schools is available for students, however. The range of options includes:

- ▶ A mainstream class where the student with special educational needs may receive additional support from the class teacher through differentiation of the curriculum, the application of Universal Design for Learning adaptions and/or additional teaching support provided by a special education teacher.
- ▶ A special class in a mainstream school with six to 11 students in each special class, depending on the particular SEN.
- ▶ A special school for students with complex special educational needs with classes ranging from six to 11 students, depending on designation of the needs of students enrolled.

Furthermore, the Visiting Teacher Service gives advice, teaching and guidance to support educational provision for children and young people who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired. This is available from birth through to pre-school, primary and post-primary levels.

A comprehensive programme of teacher professional learning seminars and webinars offers professional learning opportunities to enhance capacity in the education of children with special education needs. It covers a range of topic areas including, autism, behaviour, assessment preparation, deployment of SNAs, leadership, sensory and therapy interventions to respond to the diverse learning needs of students in inclusive learning environments.

The NCSE provides in-school assistance for whole staff, group and individual teacher supports. These may be in the form of telephone and email aid, video conferences, a school visit or a whole school seminar. Applications can be made through the NCSE school support portal and can be requested throughout the year.

The assessment of need (AoN) team, established in September 2022, coordinates the process of organising an assessment of a child's or young person's education needs as part of the Health Service Executive's (HSE) AoN process. Under the Disability Act (2005), the NCSE is responsible for nominating an appropriate person to carry out the assessment of education needs, when requested by the HSE.

In June 2024, Minister for Education Norma Foley and Junior Minister for Special Education and Inclusion Hildegarde Naughton announced a new Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS). This will involve occupational therapists, speech/language therapists and behaviour practitioners working with teachers in classrooms to design and deliver interventions for students with a range of needs.

- ▶ The ETSS includes the permanent appointment of occupational and speech and language therapists, as well as behaviour practitioners to the NCSE.
- ▶ NCSE therapists previously employed temporarily as part of the SIM Pilot were made permanent as part of the ETSS in the NCSE east region. A recruitment campaign to fill vacancies in the east and set up a new service in the west region was launched in December 2023. This included developing a promotional video and a coordinated social media campaign to raise public awareness.
- ▶ ETSS includes two strands of service delivery: sustained in-school therapy (SIT) support and regional therapy (RT) support for schools. SIT offers evidence-informed, sustained in-school supports and interventions in collaborative partnership with a set workload schools over a defined period. Regional therapy provides an evidence-informed, professional learning pathway of support for school teachers. Teacher professional learning (TPL) seminars with follow on in-school planning, coaching, modelling and reflection are available to those who attend trainings.

1.2 Provision of Information and Support to Students and Parents

Objective – Provide advice, information and support for parents, and students to maximise their educational opportunities.

1.2.1 Information and Support for Students

Student Voice

A working group was set up in February 2024 to guide, oversee and contribute to the design, development and implementation of the NCSE Student Participation Framework and Student Participation Toolkit. The purpose of both framework and toolkit is to support NCSE staff and schools to meaningfully involve all students in the educational decision-making process.

Developing the Plan

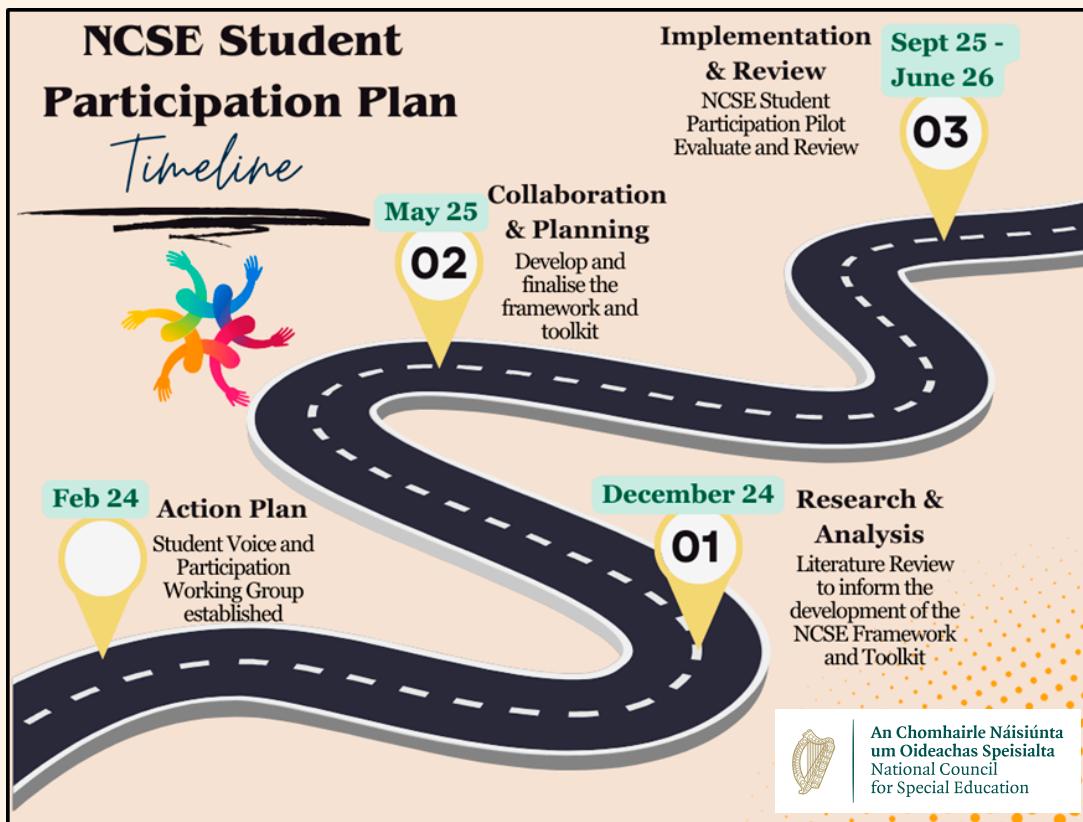
The plan has three phases (see Figure 1):

Phase 1 – research and analysis

Phase 2 – collaboration and planning

Phase 3 – implementation and review.

Initial research and analysis carried out in phase 1 will be considered in the context of the vision for the student participation plan and will form the basis for themes to be addressed in phase 2.

Figure 1: Student Participation Plan Timeline December 2024 to June 2026

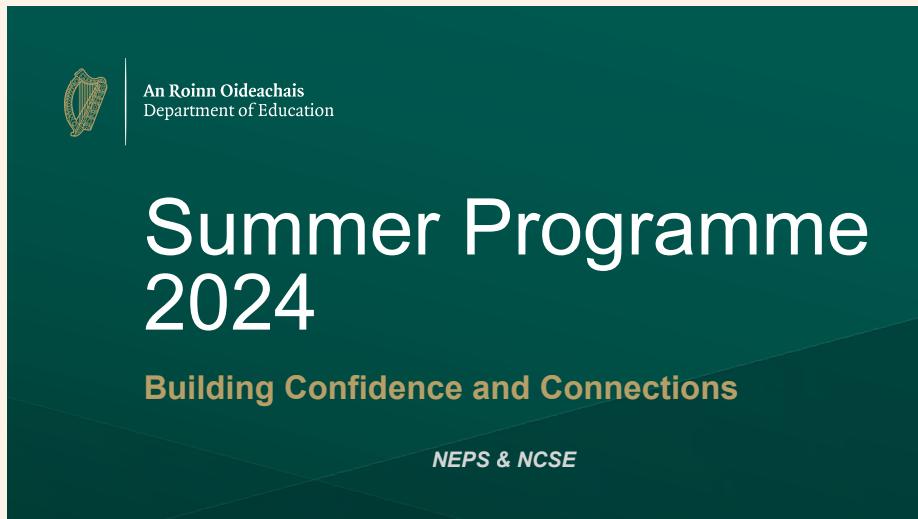
On 12 January 2024, the NCSE hosted its inaugural and highly successful Student Voice event for frontline staff. Over 190 participants were greeted by keynote speaker Eileen Daly, NCSE Council member. A group of students, a teacher and a school principal from St Aidan's Community School, Tallaght, Dublin, shared how authentic inclusion could be fostered through student participation in their Spotlite programme. Prof Laura Lundy, Queen's University Belfast, presented Space, Voice, Audience and Influence – Enabling Meaningful Participation For All Students. The day continued with breakout sessions on different aspects and experiences of student voice facilitated by NCSE staff. Feedback was very positive.

Summer Programme 2024

In 2024, the NCSE supported primary, post-primary and special schools to develop a flexible and child-centred approach to planning and implementing a summer programme. Its theme was Building Confidence and Connections.

In collaboration with the Department of Education, NEPS and Tralee Education Centre, the NCSE facilitated three online information training webinars to support programme delivery. A total of 627 attendees (teachers and school leaders) participated in the online webinars, including 474 attendees from primary, 117 from post-primary and 36 from special schools.

Figure 2: Summer Programme National Training Seminar for Primary Schools



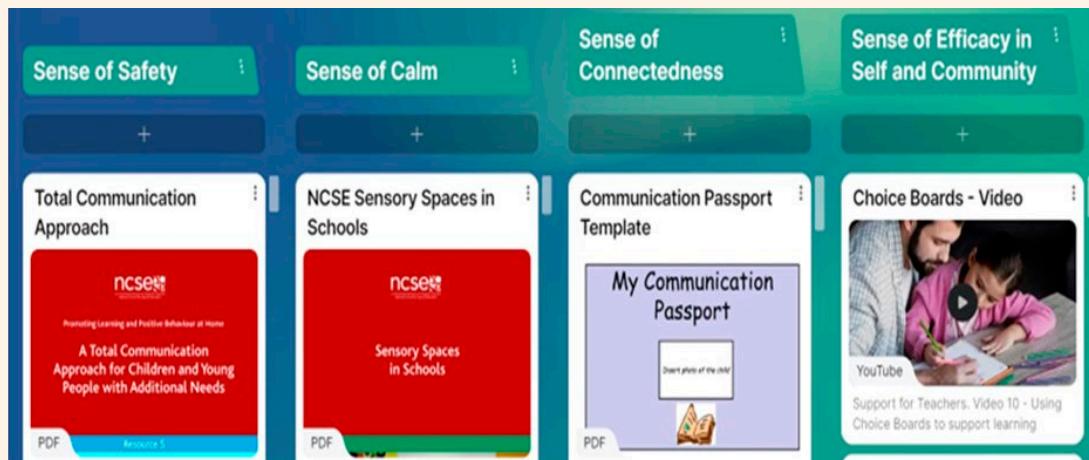
In addition, the NCSE created a summer programme padlet for schools with a comprehensive suite of online resources for teachers. These were created in line with the programme's theme of Building Confidence and Connections and were organised under the following guiding principles:

- ▶ sense of safety
- ▶ sense of calm
- ▶ sense of connectedness
- ▶ sense of efficacy in self and community
- ▶ sense of hope
- ▶ use of technology
- ▶ student voice and participation

Additional padlets to support participation of students who were deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired were provided along with a selection of resources in Irish.

Students with complex needs who could not access the school-based programme could avail of home-based resources. To support the process, the NCSE offered an overview document for schools, application forms and a listing for parents to find available tutors.

Figure 3: NCSE Padlet for Summer Programme 2024



Summer Creations

The NCSE hosted the fourth iteration of its online art competition, Summer Creations, in 2024. Open to all students participating in the home- and school-based summer provision programmes, this year's theme was Belonging.

Figure 4: NCSE Summer Creations 2024

Participants were invited to explore what it means to feel included within their communities and, as in previous years, were encouraged to express themselves through their preferred artistic media, resulting in a wide range of submissions.

This year's entries were evaluated by Cavan's digital artist and illustrator Lee-Anne Brady whose thoughtful expertise was invaluable in selecting the winning entries.

The NCSE extends its thanks to all participants, families and teachers who contributed to the success of Summer Creations 2024.

Figure 5: My Island Home by Coláiste Ghobnait, Co Galway



Figure 6: Collage by St David's College



Aaron, Michael, John, Alex, Eoin claim first in the small group category with The Jigsaw of Belonging.

ESB Science Blast – March 2024

ESB Science Blast is a free, non-competitive educational programme for primary schools (third to sixth class/key stage 2) where entire classes can engage in exploring the science behind a simple question. It is designed to help students develop essential science and maths skills in line with the primary school curriculum.

The judging experience allows students to present their work and receive valuable feedback from professionals in STEM-related fields. This interaction can inspire and motivate both teachers and students. In recognition of their efforts, every participating school is awarded a trophy to celebrate the hard work invested in their investigation.

In 2024, the NCSE was involved in the judging of three projects:

- ▶ Ballinteer ETNS, Balinteer, Dublin 16:
Project title: What is a 'Sugar Rush'?
- ▶ Shellybanks ETNS, Sandymount, Dublin 4
Project title: Can playing different genres of music affect the speed of growth and health of a plant?
- ▶ Citywise Education, Tallaght, Dublin 24
Project title: How can we see?

Figure 7: Science Blast Judges, 6 March 2024, in the RDS, Dublin



NCSE 20th Anniversary

In September 2024, the National Council for Special Education celebrated its 20th anniversary with a commemorative event held at Dublin City Hall. Under the theme Special Education in Ireland and Looking to the Future, the NCSE reflected on two decades of progress and outlined its vision for future advancement.

The day opened with addresses by Fergal Lynch, chairperson, and Martina Mannion, assistant secretary general, DE, who underscored significant developments in special education and the sustained collaboration with the Department of Education. A programme highlight was the presentation Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922-2022: Insights from a Journey through the Century by Professor Emer Ring. This gave historical context and analysis of the evolution of special education in Ireland.

John Kearney, chief executive, presented the NCSE's vision of establishing a world-class education system by 2026 underpinned by evidence-based strategies and feedback from a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Recent initiatives include the expansion of special education within mainstream schools, with the oncoming 2024-25 school year to introduce 744 new special education teaching posts and 1,216 additional special needs assistants.

Furthermore, the event gave a platform to student voices, including reflections from former student Kyle Boylan Forrester of St Aidan's Community School, Brookfield, Dublin, supported by its principal Kevin Shortfall, highlighting the impact of the NCSE's work with school communities.

This anniversary marked not only a celebration of past achievements, but also reaffirmed the NCSE's commitment to fostering an inclusive education system that enables every child to thrive.

1.2.2 Information and Support for Parents

A key NCSE role is to inform parents, schools and all stakeholders on special education matters. Each year SENOs deliver the NCSE's parental information programme that advises parents and guardians of children starting school on the educational services and supports available in their areas. SENOs delivered parental seminars across the State on transition from pre-school to primary and primary to post-primary.

Parent information clinics were tried out in Monaghan and Dublin where parents had an opportunity to drop in to an education centre to meet the local SENo and discuss their child's specialist placement requirement.

Both NCSE national coordinators hosted two online parent information sessions facilitated by Aslam and Down Syndrome Ireland. These focused on the SENo role and that of the NCSE in supporting their child and the implications of circular 80/24: New Measures to Support the Forward Planning for Special Education Provision.

1.3 Regional Team Services to Support Students, Parents and Schools

Objective – Develop, deliver and review standardised, coordinated regional team services within each local community to support students, parents and school communities to enhance the educational participation, learning experience and outcomes for students.

1.3.1 Introduction

As part of the NCSE's restructuring, inclusion teams have been created.

The autism and behaviour for learning, and the wellbeing inclusion teams were amalgamated to include two specialist leads and a national development lead. This delivers and responds nationally to teacher professional learning. Teacher professional learning includes seminars, post seminar workshops, facilitates communities of practice and in-school support. The team leads the practice of advisers and behaviour practitioners and is part of pillar 1 wider inclusion teams.

National coordination service inclusion team – is responsible for coordinating, overseeing and delivering frontline services. It has two national coordinators and an assistant principal officer. Both coordinators are responsible for ongoing professional support, liaison and coordination of consistent practice for key professions in regional teams in line with the NCSE customer charter.

National therapy inclusion team – delivers a professional, educationally focused therapy package as part of the new Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS) to build the capacity of school communities to support student inclusion, participation and well-being. It has a national development lead and two specialist leads. The former is a critical and strategic role in the project management of service delivery of NCSE's educational therapy support service to students with additional needs and school communities in the educational sector. The specialist leads in speech and language (SLT) and occupational therapy (OT) steer the governance and practice development in their respective therapy disciplines. This includes development, implementation and governance for both in scope of practice, model of support and guidelines for professional development along with supporting implementation of Department of Education policy.

National curriculum and education inclusion team – works intrinsically and collaboratively to deliver a professional student-focused service for pupils and schools in the educational sector. It has one national development lead and five special leads.

Professional learning and development inclusion team – has a programme manager specialist lead for professional learning and development, and a specialist lead for continuous professional development responsible for co-leading the review, oversight and development of teacher professional learning through NCSE seminars and professional learning opportunities.

Sensory inclusion team – has a national development lead (sensory) responsible for giving leadership on matters pertaining to sensory education; and a specialist lead (sensory) responsible for managing policy advice and practice development in the sensory area.

1.3.2 Resourcing Schools in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 School Years

This section outlines the resourcing of schools in 2024, with information on a range of supports and resources applicable to the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years.

Special Classes

18,088 places available in 2,922 special classes in mainstream schools at the end of 2023-24 school year

Special classes in mainstream schools: NCSE SENOs sanctioned an additional 308 special classes in the school year 2023-24.

By the school year's close there were 2,922 special classes in mainstream schools with 18,088 places available. This is a net increase of 2,246 places on the previous school year.

Special Schools

In the 2023-24 school year, 8,784 students were enrolled in NCSE-supported special schools supported. The NCSE allocated 1,392 teachers and 3,194 SNAs to special schools in 2023-24. The corresponding figures in the previous school year 2022-23 were 1,340 teachers and 2,971 SNAs, respectively.

Exceptional Teacher Supports Provided to Special Schools

In 2024-25 special schools have additional exceptional teaching posts, with a mix of full- and part-time allocated to 26.8 full-time equivalency. The additional teachers in special schools allocated in this way support those with highly individualised needs.

Special Education Teacher (SET) Allocation Model and SET Reviews

In February 2024, the Department of Education published circulars 0002/2024 and 0003/2024 – the Special Education Teacher (SET) allocation model and the calculation of the SET allocation for each school from the 2024-25 school year until further notice.

These posts in mainstream schools are:

Allocation Summary	SET Posts
Primary Allocated	9,780.40
Post-Primary Allocated	4,934.94

The SET allocation model distributes additional teaching resources across the entire primary and post-primary school system. This is to ensure additional teaching resources are available to support pupils/students with the greatest learning need.

Similar to previous years, following the publications of SET allocations schools could apply to the NCSE for a review if they believed it was insufficient to meet the needs of their enrolees. However, the significant difference in the 2024 process compared to previous

years was the commitment that the NCSE would conduct reviews during an outlined timeframe between March and May so schools could better plan for the following September.

The NCSE will continue to be responsible for reviewing applications from schools where 'unique' circumstances may have triggered the requirement for a review of the special education teaching resources.

The NCSE prioritised the SET review process in 2024 as needing significant improvement and was one of the first major Total Quality Management (TQM) projects undertaken. The NCSE's SET project team reviewed, updated and improved many aspects of the procedure while adhering to the commitment that reviews would be completed during the three-month window of March to May.

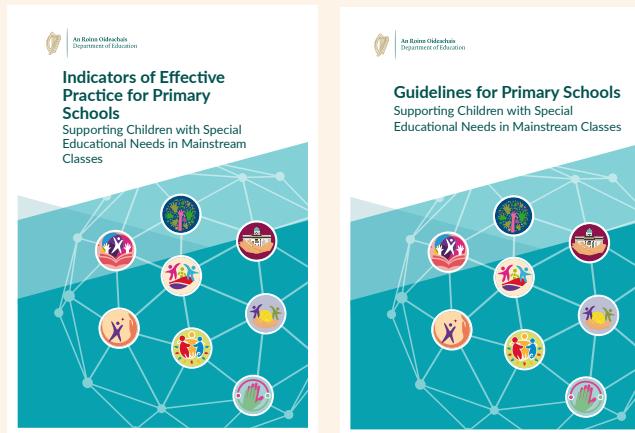
Table 2: Summary of Applications for SET Allocation Review Process 2024

Status	Number of Applications
Total Applications Received	227 – Total 210 – Primary 17 – Post-primary
Screening	All complete Levels 1 and 2 Screening
Review stage	78 desktop reviews complete 44 in-school reviews complete – 4 legacy schools had an in-school review in December 2023
Review Outcomes	135 schools received increased allocations 90 schools had no change in their allocations 2 applications were invalid

All applications received during the application window were conducted and completed within the agreed timeframe.

In line with TQM Principles, the area of continuous improvement will be a key priority for the 2025 SET review process.

SET guidelines and supporting documentation to aid schools in supporting children/young people with special education needs was published in December 2024. The revised guidelines, underpinning circular 0064/2024, replace those issued in 2017. They have been developed over the past 18 months by the inspectorate, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the NCSE with the Department. The updated guidelines aim to aid schools to support children and young people in mainstream classes with additional needs.

Figure 8: SET Guidelines and Supporting Documentation

SNA Support

In 2024, the NCSE sought feedback on the national exceptional review of the SNA process from school management bodies and through the initial findings of the NCSE-commissioned evaluation of its frontline services by the University of Derby and Mary Immaculate College, Co Limerick. This enabled it to review the current review process in order to improve access, transparency and management of a streamlined method for schooling communities and frontline NCSE staff. A SENO support meeting was developed as a result that consisted of a two-hour presentation on principles of SNA deployment, and guidance on applying for and receiving an SNA review.

In April 2024, the proposal was piloted in 35 primary, post-primary, rural, urban and Gaeltacht schools. The local SENO hosted the meeting for a small cluster of schools (up to five) with the principal and one other staff member invited to attend. All participants agreed this would help them ensure those with the greatest care needs would receive the greatest support in their schools. Participants rated the quality of materials provided as very high or high quality. Most reported that the meeting changed their understanding of how SNAs should be deployed and consequently changed their approach to and understanding of the NCSE SNA review process. All indicated that the time taken to attend the meeting would positively assist them in making future applications for SNA support and would save time and effort in preparing for the review.

It was decided to offer the SENO support meeting to all schools from September 2024 with feedback from the pilot incorporated into the national rollout. It is now an integral part of the revised SNA review process.

The NCSE worked on developing a new circular on the SNA allocation model for the 2024-25 school year to incorporate a revised review mechanism. The review is no longer a process in which schools apply to the NCSE for additional SNA staffing in exceptional cases. A review can be initiated at NCSE or school level and the local SENO always carries it out. It is now student-focused and emphasises student access to SNA aid on a continuum of support with schools reconnecting and developing relationships with their local SENO. The revised SNA review can lead to a suite of school-based review outcomes incorporating school TPL requirements. The Department of Education issued circular 0049/2024 on 30 May 2024.

NCSE guidelines on reviewing SNA support in mainstream classes was issued Statewide in September 2024. Before this occurred, all SENO staff received an information webinar along with a follow-on in-person training day delivered regionally in August 2024.

Figure 9: Department of Education Circular and NCSE Guidelines for Mainstream Primary and Post-Primary Schools

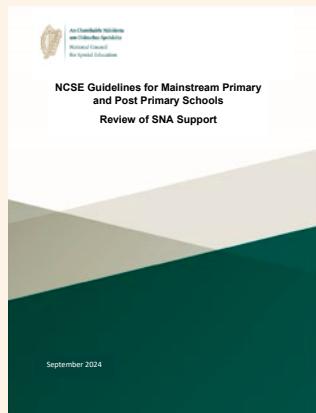


Table 3: Outcome of SNA Exceptional Review Process, for 2023-24 School Year

Outcome	No of Applications
Total Applications	569
Increased Allocation	361
Number of Additional SNA Posts	348.3

The number of SNAs allocated to schools at the end of the 2023-24 school year and as at the end of December 2024, is set out in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Number of SNA Posts

	End 2023-24 School Year	End December 2024
SNA Posts	21,001.00	22,575.23
End 2022-23 School Year		End December 2023
SNA Posts	19,480.72	20,787.76

SNA Review Appeals

Schools wishing to appeal their SNA exceptional review outcome could do so by submitting an application for appeal. By end 2024, nine schools had submitted an appeal, of which four were concluded by that date.

Applications for Additional Supports

In the 2023-24 school year, SENOs processed over 13,000 applications for additional supports for students with special needs under two allocation schemes: school transport; and assistive technology/specialist equipment. Table 5 below outlines the number of applications processed under each scheme.

Table 5: Summary of NCSE Processed Applications for School Year 2023-24

Scheme	No of Applications
School Transport	5,991
Assistive Technology/Specialist Equipment	7,241
Total	13,232

Supports for Ukrainian Children with Special Needs

In collaboration with the Department of Education, the NCSE continued to engage with schools as required on the revised SNA and SET allocations for the arrival of Ukrainian students. These allocations specifically targeted Ukrainian students with special needs in 2023-24.

Recognising that a proportion of these children would require special education support, the NCSE continues to provide a Ukrainian/Russian written translation services to schools and their families as required.

At end December 2024, 18,291 Ukrainian pupils had been enrolled in schools across Ireland.

1.4 Student Placement and Transitions

Objective – Plan for the provision and review of suitable student placement and seamless transitions together with parents, schools and stakeholders

1.4.1 Introduction

In 2024, the NCSE continued to plan for establishing special classes and school planning in collaboration with the Department of Education for the 2025-26 school year. National coordinators meet weekly with the special education and planning and building units in the Department of Education. This meeting identified solutions for verified demand for special schools and special classes across the State where places available fell short. The national coordinators, principal officer in pillar 1 and chief executive worked closely with patrons where provision deficits were evident in a particular area. Circular 0080/2024 supports forward planning for special classes and special school places where demand has been identified and verified earlier in the school year.

1.4.2 Establishment of Special Classes and Schools

The NCSE continued to plan for setting up special classes and schools with the Department of Education throughout 2024.

Special Schools

The Department and NCSE continued joint work in 2024 on special school demand for future school years. Creating new special schools and expanding a range of existing ones is under consideration.

Minister for Education Norma Foley and Junior Minister for Special Education and Inclusion Hildegarde Naughton announced five new special schools in October 2024: one in Cork, Tipperary, Monaghan and two in Dublin. These commence in September 2025 and it is anticipated they will initially enrol around 78 students in September 2025 gradually increasing numbers in coming years.

Strategic engagement continues to focus on ensuring high pressure areas – based on known trends, local demand, suitable current accommodation and urban centres – are factored into likely school locations. The new circular 80/24 has supported this work in establishing demand for special schools before 1 February ahead of the next school year.

Special Classes

The NCSE and Department of Education collaboration continued throughout 2024 on providing special class placements in the current school year and on forward planning for 2025-26 and 2026-27.

The initial list of new special classes was published for the 2024-25 school year with 369 additional classes. SENOs worked with schools to finalise their complete list for additional special classes; the number reached 410 ahead of the new school year.

The NCSE continues to engage strategically to ensure demand is met and that identification of pressure points, locally and regionally, occurs as early as possible. The new circular 80/24 has supported this work in confirming demand for special classes before 1 February 2026 ahead of the next school year.

Working with the Department on forward planning for special schools and classes continued throughout 2024 to support long-term preparation for students needing specialist places.

1.4.3 Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) Transition Pilot Programme

CES Transitions Pilot

Government's Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024, launched in October 2015, outlined a cross-governmental framework to support employment of people with disabilities. This ten-year strategy identified key actions including a pilot programme announced by Minister for Education Norma Foley and former Junior Minister for Special Education Josepha Madigan in 2022.

This pilot focuses on improving post-school transition pathways for young people with disabilities. It aims to assist them in planning their future by identifying and addressing potential barriers to accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education, training and employment.

This collaborative effort involves various Government Departments and agencies, including the NCSE under the (CES) umbrella.

The pilot began in November 2022 with 20 participating geographically diverse schools across north Dublin and Co Galway. This selection included special, disadvantaged (DEIS), single-sex and rural schools to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges students with disabilities faced in various educational settings.

The pilot involved 92 students with varying levels of support needs, ranging from mild/moderate to complex intellectual disabilities. Each participating school received 12 hours of dedicated support per week.

The programme had two key themes: Making Informed Decisions and Skills for Post-School Life. Both aimed to empower students to make informed choices about their future and equip them with the necessary life and employability skills for successful transitions. The pilot's school phase ended June 2024, with follow-up to take place with them in their post school destinations.

Phase 2

Forty-one special schools across Ireland have been selected to participate in phase 2 of the CES Pilot 2024-25. Each has been allocated six hours per week for transition planning activities. This autonomy empowers schools to leverage their unique understanding of their student body and design creative and innovative approaches to fostering successful transitions. The pilot emphasises a student-centred approach, prioritising the identification of optimal post-school destinations for each individual. The learnings and best practices gleaned from this pilot programme will inform future practices in transition planning across all special and mainstream schools in Ireland.

Towards Inclusion: A Pilot Programme for Inter-School Collaboration

The Towards Inclusion pilot programme involves 20 schools: ten special and ten mainstream. Its goal is to foster inclusive educational practices through collaborative efforts between neighbouring schools. The programme facilitates sharing expertise and creates opportunities for teachers and students to engage in cooperative learning experiences, deepen inter-school relationships and enhance educational outcomes.

Programme Scope and Implementation

The pilot covers the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years. Participants have the flexibility to determine their commencement date within this timeframe. Activities will be grounded in sound pedagogical principles and informed by relevant educational research, policies and national strategies.

Inter-School Collaboration

The Department's special education unit carefully selected and geographically paired the first 20 participating schools. This strategic pairing facilitates sharing of local knowledge and expertise, enabling teachers to observe and take part in lessons within other school settings through a reciprocal arrangement.

The programme aims to achieve the following outcomes:

Enhanced educational outcomes: improve classroom practices to better support the learning requirements of those with special educational needs ultimately improving educational outcomes for all students.

Teacher professional development: upskill teachers in their ability to identify, understand and effectively support the diverse learning needs of all students.

Fostering inter-school collaboration: encourage and strengthen collaborative partnerships between schools, facilitating sharing of expertise and best practices in SEN and inclusive education.

Broadening teacher understanding: this will deepen teacher understanding of a range of learning needs and how they are addressed in different educational contexts.

Facilitated student transitions: identify and explore opportunities to support student transitions between different school types more effectively.

Leveraging teacher expertise: explore and implement strategies for leveraging the expertise of teachers with specialised SEN knowledge to support students in other school settings.

1.5 Implementation of the Educational Therapy Support Service

Objective – Develop a wraparound support service in schools as part of the National Therapy Support Service.

1.5.1 Introduction

In June 2024 Minister for Education Norma Foley and Minister for Special Education and Inclusion Hildegarde Naughton announced the foundation of an Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS). This incorporates the appointment of occupational and speech and language therapists. In tandem with the announcement, permanent appointment of behaviour practitioners to the NCSE was approved.

NCSE therapists, previously employed on a temporary basis under the school inclusion model pilot, were made permanent in their posts in the NCSE east region. Recruitment began to fill eastern vacancies and to launch a new service in the west region.

1.5.2 In-School Therapy Project (ISTP)

NCSE Sustained In-School Therapy 2024

In late 2023 the school inclusion model: in-school therapy project completed work with the 75 SIM pilot schools. From January 2024, the focus shifted to identifying new schools in Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare that would receive a NCSE sustained in-school therapy (SIT) service for two years.

SIT Prioritisation Pathway

A bespoke, evidence-informed, data-driven prioritisation pathway was developed and implemented. This included schools being required to attend an introductory webinar on SIT, after which they were invited to submit an application form via the NCSE website. A three-step screening process was conducted on all applications received. Its outcomes are detailed below.

Table 6: SIT Prioritisation Process – Counties Dublin, Kildare, and Wicklow

Teachers/School Leaders Attending Webinar	787
Applications Processed	313
Schools Offered SIT	22
Schools On Panel	212

SIT School Support 2024

Support began for 22 schools in September 2024 and the following data reflect the contacts with schools and teacher professional learning (TPL) events for schools receiving SIT, up to December 2024. Three occupational therapists and four speech and language therapist were in post during this period.

Table 7: Contacts with Schools

School Type	No of Contacts	Contact Mode	No of Contacts
Primary	163	School support visits	96
		• Primary – 59	
		• Post-Primary – 29	
		• Special – 8	
Post-Primary	86	Online meetings	25
Special Schools	24	Email/phone contacts	152
Total Contacts	273	Total Contacts	273

Table 8: Sustained In-school Therapy/Teacher Professional Learning Events

TPL Events	Number of Teachers
20	388

Figure 10: Focus of Sustained In-school Therapy/Teacher Professional Learning Events 2024

1.5.3 NCSE Regional Therapy 2024

NCSE regional therapists (occupational/speech and language) worked within two regional teams as part of the SIM pilot alongside NCSE behaviour practitioners until that strand of the pilot ceased in June 2024. Since then, NCSE regional therapists work within the new ETSS.

The focus of NCSE regional therapists is to build teacher skills and capacity in schools through a range of seminars, post-seminar workshops, teacher resources and in-school support. The TPL events (seminars and post-seminar workshops) aim to build teacher capacity to support their students in areas such as speech, language and communication needs, sensory needs and organisational skills. Schools and teachers are also offered follow-up in-school support to further build their capacity to embed the learning from the seminars and workshops in the classroom.

Regional Therapy TPL Events

From January to June 2024, four speech and language therapists delivered three seminars to 80 teachers in the two SIM pilot regions and 40 teachers availed of follow-up in-school implementation support.

From September to December 2024, three NCSE speech and language therapists delivered three seminars to 90 teachers across counties Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow, with 33 teachers availing of follow-up in-school implementation support.

Regional Therapy Teacher Implementation Support

NCSE regional therapy implementation support includes direct in-school visits, phone, and email support. From September to December 2024 there were 221 contacts with schools and 33 in-school visits. The primary focus of these visits was planning, modelling, information sharing and reflection. Of the 33 visits completed from September to December 2024, 14 reported educational outcomes in academic achievement, independence, attendance and happiness. All 14 have evidence of teacher capacity building, with one thus far providing evidence of a direct impact on students.

Table 9: NCSE Regional Therapy (RT) Teacher Implementation Support, September-December 2024

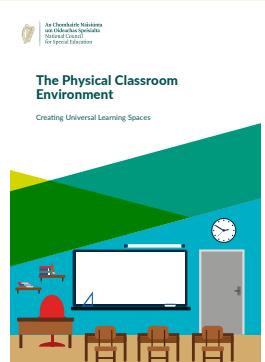
Number of School Contacts	Number of School Visits	Teacher Reported Educational Outcomes
221	33	Academic achievement; independence; attendance; happiness

Outcome Measurement in Regional Therapy

The unique model of NCSE regional therapy presents challenges in assessing the impact of supports provided on teacher practice and student outcomes. A procurement process identified a software package called OutNav that supports organisations in assessing the impact of their practices and report on the outcomes that matter. NCSE therapists and management finalised data collection procedures late in 2024 and will be able to begin systematically reporting on regional therapy outcomes in 2025. If deemed effective, the software has potentially wider uses across the NCSE's frontline services.

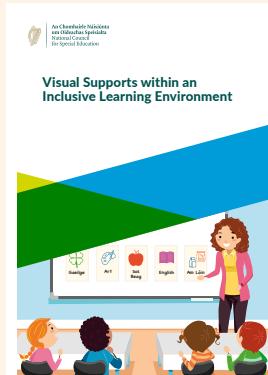
NCSE Therapy Resource Development

NCSE therapists developed several resources in 2024 and published them on the website for the benefit of all teachers in schools nationwide. All are available at the following link: <https://ncse.ie/therapy-resources>



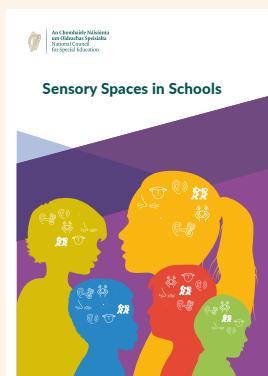
The Physical Classroom Environment: Creating Universal Learning Spaces

The Physical Classroom Environment booklet is a comprehensive guide designed to help teachers create inclusive and adaptable learning environments that benefit all students. It explores a range of evidence-informed strategies and practical tools that teachers can easily implement in their classrooms. By focusing on the physical environment, the booklet aims to enhance student participation, reduce barriers to learning and create a sense of belonging for every student.



Visual Supports within an Inclusive Learning Environment

The NCSE Visual Supports within an Inclusive Learning Environment booklet includes information, strategies and resources to assist teachers in use of visuals to support all student communication and participation in school. When visuals are implemented in all classrooms and shared spaces as part of a total communication approach, they support creation and promotion of an inclusive learning environment where students are better supported to understand and communicate throughout the day.



Sensory Spaces in Schools (second edition)

This resource adopts a strengths-based, student-centred approach to looking at the sensory environments within a school. It focuses on establishing a cultural practice within a school where sensory spaces and sensory strategies are utilised throughout the school day. It offers guidelines for teachers and school staff to holistically support students by collaboratively creating and using sensory spaces with their students.

Conferences and Awards

NCSE therapists engaged with a range of external stakeholders and conference opportunities. Some conference contributions to note include the following:

Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) Special Education Conference:
A presentation on progress of the School Inclusion Model: In-School Therapy Pilot and intentions for expanding the NCSE therapy service.

Figure 11: INTO Conference 2024



The Council Occupational Therapy for European Countries – European Speech and Language Association (COTEC-ESLA) Collaboration of Impact Award: The NCSE took third place for its submission to the COTEC-ESLA Collaboration of Impact Award on the topic: The Impact and Outcomes of OT and SLT Collaboration in the Provision of Sustained In-school Support.

Association of Occupational Therapist Ireland, September 2024: A Teacher Resource Promoting Classroom Design That Supports Participation for All was a presentation on the new NCSE publication, *The Physical Environment: Creating Universal Learning Spaces*, that included discussion on the practical implications of its use in providing school-based therapy supports.

European Speech and Language Association (ESLA) Congress, September 2024: An NCSE team presented two oral presentations and one on a poster detailing its therapy's unique work in building the capacity of teachers and schools to enhance educational outcomes and build and integrate communicative participation by supporting meaningful student voice.

Figure 12: Poster Presentation at ESLA Congress, September 2024



Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) Conference, October 2024: Harnessing The Power of the Physical Classroom: The NCSE's occupational therapy team delivered a teacher workshop exploring practical approaches to inclusive classroom design as detailed in the new NCSE Therapy Physical Environment Booklet.

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NAMBSE), October 2024: NCSE Educational Therapy Support Service (ETSS). The NCSE's therapy specialist leads presented an information session on the new service and how it will expand into 2025-26.

Education Buildings Conference, November 2024: Sensory Spaces: Creating Spaces that Support Participation and Learning for All. The NCSE presented guidance on sensory spaces in schools, exploring universal, proactive interventions and approaches to creating regulation-friendly classrooms essential for some students, but beneficial for all.

Figure 13: Education Buildings Conference, November 2024

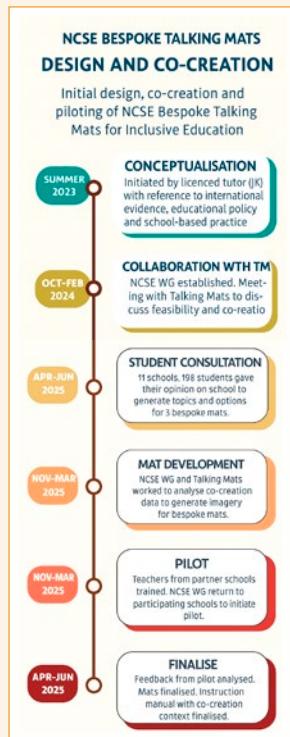
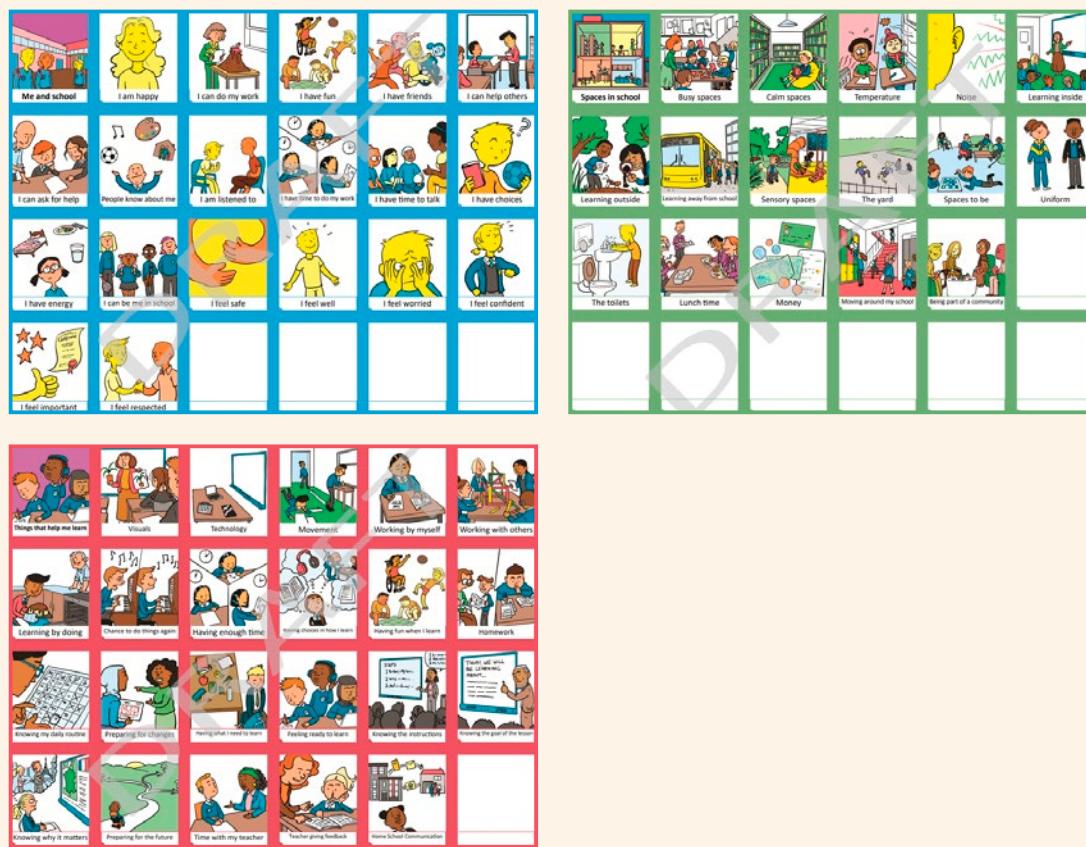


Talking Mats as an NCSE Tool to Promote Inclusive Practice in Schools

In line with the NCSE's inclusive education policy, its staff, alongside teachers in Ireland, have identified a lack of awareness and understanding of how to effectively gather and use the student voice in schools. To address this, the NCSE has identified Talking Mats TM as an evidenced-based tool that could be used to ensure 'students were heard' (Messiou et al., 2024) in the drive to realise a world-class inclusive education system.

At end 2023, an NCSE working group engaged in extensive consultation with Talking Mats TM and the University of Stirling. This consultation guided its working group in the development of bespoke NCSE Talking Mats TM for Inclusive Education. Crucially, development of these mats was informed by students gathered by teachers in 11 partner schools and NCSE working group members during March-July 2024.

Analysis of the Voice Of Students in the autumn term generated 53 options assigned to one of three pre-determined Talking Mats TM topics generated by the NCSE. Me and My School, Spaces in School and What Helps Me Learn in School were refined with reference to the data collected. The three mats are presented below in draft form.

Figure 14: Design and Co-Creation Pathway**Figure 15: NCSE Bespoke Talking Mats for Inclusive Education – Drafts**

Additionally, in November 2024, the NCSE's licensed tutor for Talking Mats TM delivered training to 17 teachers from seven partner schools. They are now piloting NCSE Talking Mats TM to seek student opinion on the final draft.

The project will be finalised in April 2025, with a view to phased dissemination among trained NCSE staff. NCSE Talking Mats TM will be used with schools to plan for and evaluate teaching, learning and educational environments in order to promote more inclusivity.

1.5.4 National SNA Training Programme – Level 6 Diploma in Inclusive School Support

Delivering the national SNA training programme that began in 2021 has continued. It is delivered by the UCD School of Education along with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems. The course is accredited as a NFQ Special Purpose Level 6 Diploma in Inclusive School Support. In 2023, following a process of accreditation, a new course title was approved: level 6 diploma in inclusive school support. Programme graduates receive a level 6 special purpose award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

About 4,100 students have participated to date with 2,962 having graduated so far. Enrolment and graduation numbers for years one to four are shown in the table below:

Table 10: Student Enrolment and Graduation Numbers

Cohort	Start Date	Enrolees	Graduates
1	Jan 2021	500	458
2	Sep 2021	941	839
3	Sep 2022	961	834
4	Sep 2023	903	831

In July 2024, the NCSE sought tenders for a successor to its existing national online training programme. In December 2024, Atlantic Technological University, St Angela's College, was deemed successful. Design and development of the course's new iteration began in January 2025.

1.5.5 National Nursing Pilot Programme

A pilot national nursing scheme to support children with complex healthcare needs was launched³ on 21 October 2022, based on the recommendations of a cross agency planning group. It aimed to provide nursing supports so that children with complex healthcare needs could attend school. It complements the current provision through community-based services.

The scheme operates as a partnership between the NCSE and HSE Primary Care, with the former managing applications, HSE responsible for clinical matters and the Department of Education supplying funding. In-school nursing support for students is delivered through pre-established paediatric support contracts for the children, with clinical supervision by HSE Prima Care.

Many schools, in particular special schools, currently have nurses on-site funded through a variety of arrangements. The pilot service does not displace existing nursing services or supports in schools.

Since the national nursing pilot began in late 2022, it has had 42 applications. Twenty-two of these were approved for support; 13 did not meet eligibility criteria and at the time of the report seven applications were in progress. An appeals process is available for unsuccessful applicants.

The pilot will be evaluated in 2025 to inform future provision of nursing support for students with complex healthcare needs.

1.6 Assessment of Need

Objective – Comply with our statutory obligations under the Disability Act by working with all stakeholders in response to receiving AoN-related referrals to provide assistance in completing assessment of need by the HSE.

In accordance with Section 8.3 of the Disability Act, (2005), extensive engagement with education stakeholders, schools, the Department of Education and the HSE has continued as the NCSE responded to the HSE assessment of need (AoN) process. When requested by the HSE, the NCSE must assist in an assessment of a child's or young person's education needs by nominating an appropriate person to complete a report of education needs. Working to coordinate the process, the NCSE's dedicated AoN team was expanded during 2024 in response to the growing number of HSE referrals.

This team started in 2022 and at end December 2024, the NCSE received 13,737 HSE referrals, with 5,687 of these resolved across a range of school settings (see Table 11 below):

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/national-nursing-pilot-for-children-with-complex-healthcare-needs-pilot-scheme/>

Table 11: Record of AoN Referrals Recorded by NCSE from 2022-24

Setting	HSE Referrals	Report Sent to HSE AO	Referral Closed
Primary School	9,072	4,291	4,468
Post-Primary School	1,628	632	659
Special School	216	94	104
Early Learning Childcare (incl HT autism settings)	2,438	362	392
Other	383	19	64
TOTAL	13,737	5,398	5,687

In all, total number of reports sent to the HSE AO (5,398) in Table 11 differs from referrals closed (5,687) where the following applies: the HSE no longer requires a report of education needs; duplicate referrals; and those where parent has withdrawn from the AoN process.

From January to end December 2024, the NCSE had received 5,712 referrals from the HSE, with 4,069 of these resolved across a range of school settings (see Table 12).

Table 12: Record of AoN Referrals Resolved by NCSE in 2024 Alone.

Setting	HSE Referrals	Report Sent to HSE AO	Referrals Closed
Primary School	3,436	2,843	3,247
Post-Primary School	673	356	421
Special School	55	72	87
Early Learning Childcare (incl HT autism settings)	1,394	212	261
Other	154	13	53
TOTAL	5,712	3,496	4,069

The Department of Education [circular 0025/2024](https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/16c72-report-of-education-need-for-the-purpose-of-the-assessment-of-need-disability-act-2005/)⁴ institutionalising need assessment, was published 15 April 2024. The process was subject to consultation with management bodies. As a result, the NCSE Report of Education Needs and the Guidance Note for Schools have been updated to reflect this circular.

In May 2024, the NCSE hosted an [AoN information webinar](https://padlet.com/NCSEIE/assessment-of-need-report-of-education-needs-tuarasc-il-ar-r-bybxxgaixyqe8u6y/wish-do3MQJB6oD7OQ15w)⁵ for 250 school leaders and teachers. Presenters from the HSE and Department of Education joined the NCSE in outlining their respective roles in the AoN process and advising schools on how their input can assist in completing the education element of the HSE's AoN report. The webinars aim to familiarise participants with the assessment process and support them in finalising the NCSE report of education needs.

The NCSE will continue to monitor its role in assessing education needs, including revisions to processes, further development of resources and communications (including additional information webinars for stakeholders) regarding all settings for AoN.

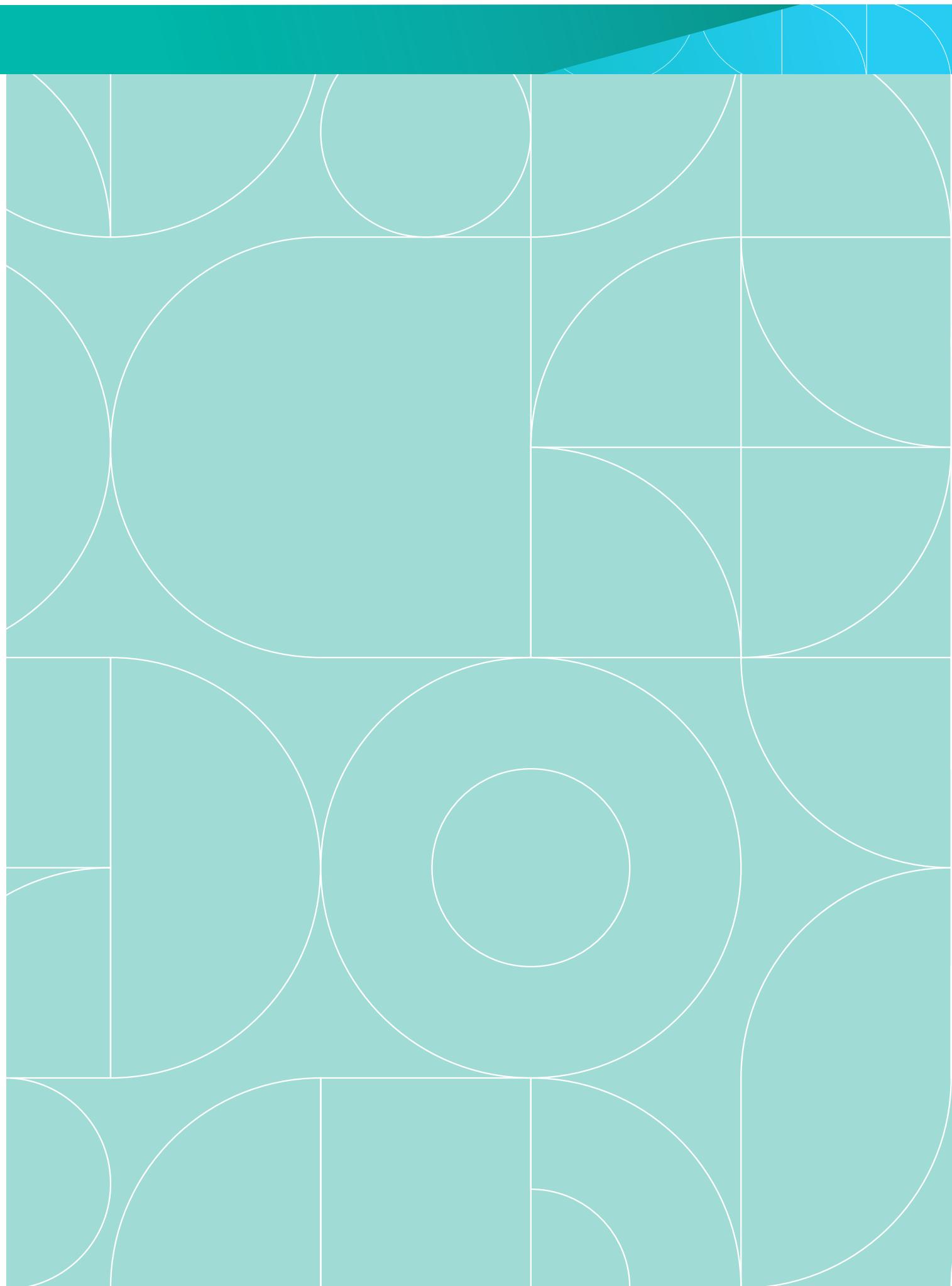
Figure 16: NCSE AoN Padlet

The Padlet board is organized into several sections:

- NCSE AON Information:** Includes a link to the NCSE website on AON.
- Guidance Note/ Nótá Treorach:** Includes a link to the Guidance Note for Early Learning and Childcare Settings.
- Report of Education Needs Form/ Foirm Tuarascáil ar Riachtanais Oideachais:** Includes a link to the Report of Education Needs for the purpose of the Assessment of Need (Disability Act 2005) form.
- Exemplars-Support Guide/Treoir Tacalochta CNOS:** Includes a link to the NCSE Support Guide for ELC Settings.
- FAQ/Ceisteanna Coitianta:** Includes a link to the NCSE Support Guide for Early Learning and Childcare Settings and the Assessment of Need Report of Education Needs FAQs ENG Final.
- Information for Parents:** Includes a link to the NCSE Report of Education Needs Information for parents.
- Nótá Treorach don Lúathfhoghlaim agus do Shuiomh Cúram Leanáí:** Includes a link to the Nótá Treorach don Lúathfhoghlaim agus do Shuiomh Cúram Leanáí.

4 <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/16c72-report-of-education-need-for-the-purpose-of-the-assessment-of-need-disability-act-2005/>

5 <https://padlet.com/NCSEIE/assessment-of-need-report-of-education-needs-tuarasc-il-ar-r-bybxxgaixyqe8u6y/wish-do3MQJB6oD7OQ15w>



Strategic Goal 2:

Research, Policy and Practice

Strategic Goal 2 – Research, Policy and Practice

Develop and provide expert policy advice, practice and professional learning programmes that are evidence-informed and underpinned by the latest national and international research and expert input.

NCSE sets out four objectives and ten key actions for Strategic Goal 2, Research, Policy and Practice, in its Statement of Strategy 2023-26.

Goal 2 – Objectives and Actions

Objectives	Actions
<p>1. Provide independent, expert and evidence-informed policy advice to the Minister for Education and support the implementation of advice as required.</p>	<p>1. Develop policy advice for the Minister informed by expert advice and evidence-based data and research.</p> <p>2. Develop a programme of expert professional learning to ensure NCSE delivery of best practice informed education in school communities.</p>
<p>2. Develop, deliver and review evidence-informed practice and professional learning programmes to support the inclusion of students in a manner responsive and relevant to the needs of school communities.</p>	<p>1. Review, prepare and deliver an enhanced programme of sustained support and professional learning programmes to school communities.</p> <p>2. Engage in ongoing consultation on and continuous improvement of NCSE professional learning programmes to school communities.</p> <p>3. Provide and coordinate delivery of resources, logistical and in-person/online engagement with NCSE professional learning programmes to school communities locally and nationally.</p> <p>4. Develop a programme of practice-based research to inform local school practice, and national guidance and advice.</p>

Objectives	Actions
3. Engage in extensive consultation with our education stakeholders, including our Consultative Forum, parents, students and advocacy groups and draw on expert knowledge and advice.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and coordinate an annual engagement schedule with relevant representative, leadership, management and patron bodies to inform discernment of school community-based needs and partnership opportunities. 2. Support the work of the Consultative Forum in guiding and informing NCSE's work.
4. Produce an annual programme of commissioned and in-house research to inform NCSE work.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement a national programme of commissioned and in-house research. 2. Disseminate research and evidence-informed practice to all stakeholders using our website and social media, the annual research conference and other stakeholder events.

2.1 Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Special Classes

Objective – Provide independent, expert and evidence-informed policy advice to the Minister for Education and support the implementation of advice as required.

In January 2024, the NCSE published the policy advice paper, [An Inclusive Education for An Inclusive Society](https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_An_Inclusive_Society.pdf)⁶. This landmark publication outlined a roadmap for transitioning Ireland towards a more inclusive education system. It is informed by extensive research, consultations and international case studies documented in the Literature and International Administrative Reviews that were published separately.

The NCSE remains committed to advancing principles outlined in the paper and working towards realising a world class inclusive education system for Ireland.

⁶ https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf



2.2 Programme of Evidence-Informed Practice and Professional Learning to Support Inclusion of Students in School Communities

Objective – Develop, deliver and review evidence-informed practice and professional learning programmes to support the inclusion of students in a manner that is responsive and relevant to the needs of school communities.

2.2.1 Introduction

During 2024, the NCSE reviewed its commitment to support teachers through development, delivery and review of responsive and progressive professional learning techniques. This included a consideration of its in-school supports, coaching and modelling techniques to support and embed teacher practice at primary, post-primary and special school levels. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) pilot commenced in March 2024, and the NCSE will present its findings in early 2027.

The Visiting Teacher Service continues to support children who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired and their families. In April 2024, the NCSE co-hosted the 27th Joint European Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf (FEAPDA) Congress in Malahide, Dublin. Delegates from around the world attended.

The NCSE finalised the Behaviour Framework-NCSE Relate. Engagement with school communities informed its development and presentations were facilitated at several managerial conferences and at parental and advocacy levels. Behaviour practitioner support was provided to 47 special schools in the east and south regions. Autism advisers and behaviour practitioners provided training to teachers in four new special schools. Behaviour for learning and wellbeing advisers were assigned to selected post-primary schools that qualify for this support. Following release of Department of Education's guidelines Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations in December 2024, the NCSE began to deliver whole school training to special schools.

The primary curriculum, language and mathematics frameworks continue to underpin the work of the NCSE's curriculum and education team in supporting curricular implementation in primary and special schools throughout 2024.

The NCSE continued to support schools, children and parents by creating 410 special classes at primary and post-primary levels. It offered support to schools with its summer and introductory courses for primary and post-primary teachers in the newly established classes. Experienced teachers of these classes received support via sustained support workshops run together with the Middletown Centre for Autism in Co Armagh, Northern Ireland.

2.2.2 NCSE Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

As part of the professional learning programme for school leaders and teachers, the NCSE provides a comprehensive suite of seminars, post-seminar workshops and facilitates communities of practice to support the inclusion of all children, especially those with special educational needs.

In 2024, the NCSE delivered 221 seminars either online (65) or in-person that were attended by 5,272 teachers and school leaders, some of which were at multiple seminars.

In December 2024, the NCSE filled two new roles to enhance the support and professional learning and development of schools: an educational technologist and comhordaitheoir thionscadal na Gaeilge.

The professional learning programme offers guidance to school leaders and teachers through the hundreds of NCSE high quality seminars available to all schools.

The NCSE's teacher professional learning booklet and poster for 2024-25 was sent to every school and education centre in the State to support a teacher's or school leader's informed decision on the professional learning journey.

2.2.3 In-School Support

As part of the professional learning programme for school leaders and teachers, the NCSE also provides professional development based on requests made through its school portal. In 2024, it received 3,451 support requests through this. School support may be offered via telephone or online support, email correspondence or school visits for individual, small groups or whole staff sessions.

School Support Service Delivery Project

As part of the NCSE's commitment to continuous improvement, a school support service delivery Total Quality Management project started in 2024. This three-part project commits to reviewing and reimagining the school portal user experience, the model of professional development support offered and evaluation of the data collected.

At the conclusion of phase 1, the NCSE had:

- ▶ improved the schools application process
- ▶ improved the time in which it responded to support requests
- ▶ improved communication with schools via the school portal
- ▶ improved the school support data collected
- ▶ developed responses to support team managers, advisers and behaviour practitioners to communicate with schools improving communication and making their work more efficient.

In September 2024, the NCSE inclusion team held a school support event to kick off the new year. Over two days team managers, advisers and behaviour practitioners were updated on the school portal. Support was provided and opportunities to meet their regional teams facilitated. Finally, all participants learned about enhanced pathways to support schools and each other.

Phase 2 of the project began in December 2024 and the NCSE looks forward to its outputs, expected mid-2025.

Figure 17: NCSE School Support

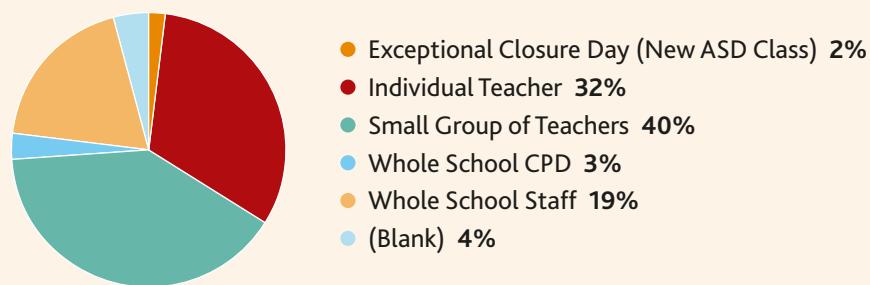


Figure 18: National Distribution of School Support Applications for 2023-24



The NCSE is committed to and continues its involvement in two deliverables for the digital strategy. In 2024, it worked with OIDE to support a primary teacher summer online programme to support inclusion via use of digital technology.

- ▶ This course had an 84 per cent completion rate with 1,499 participants (13 per cent principals).
- ▶ Feedback showed teachers found the course relevant, enabling better practice.
- ▶ The NCSE will have an input into revising the course which runs again in summer 2025.

In January 2024, the NCSE provided support to postgrad students in SEN in St Patrick's College DCU with a focus on assistive and digital technology.

The NCSE continues to support its educational partner, OIDE, in delivering programmes to induct newly appointed principals (Misneach), deputy principals (Tánaiste) and running workshops on leading inclusion in primary and post-primary programmes. Following publication of circular 0028/2024, the NCSE partnered with Oide to design the Caidrimh Leadership Programme to support administrative deputy principals in special schools.

Universal Design for Learning

In March 2024, the NCSE invited all schools to express their interest in an innovative Universal Design for Learning (UDL) pilot in schools. This is a framework to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all students by offering choice and flexibility. In a short time, the NCSE had received 243 applications to take part in the pilot from which schools were selected.

In May 2024, one school leader and two teachers from the 44 participating schools joined the NCSE at the project launch with chief executive John Kearney to hear the experiences of Jean Reale, assistant professor in academic practice, LEAD Centre, Mary Immaculate College, Co Limerick; Jeremy Wrenn, technology enhanced learning officer, Kerry ETB, and Catherine Barry, principal, Two Mile Community National School in Killarney, Co Kerry.

At its conclusion, participating schools were given Universal Design for Learning resources and the opportunity for each school leader and two of its teachers to participate in NCSE-funded professional learning over the summer.

From September 2024 onwards, each school officially began its UDL journey by receiving support through a combination of the following opportunities:

- ▶ an NCSE UDL facilitator
- ▶ NCSE seminar(s)
- ▶ in-school support
- ▶ drop-in clinics (office hour sessions)
- ▶ professional learning communities.

2.2.4 Visiting Teacher Service

Throughout 2024, NCSE visiting teachers (VTs) has supported children who are deaf/hard of hearing and who are blind/visually impaired and their families. This support was both in the home and in schools. The VTs are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss and/or visual impairment. They offer longitudinal support to children, their families and schools from time of referral through to the end of post-primary education. Visiting teachers support children/young people, parents, guardians, teachers and other professionals involved with the child. Frequency and nature of support takes into account a range of factors based on individual student needs and requirements. Central to the service's work is liaison with other professionals and agencies including audiological scientists, ophthalmology services, speech and language therapists, low vision specialists, psychologists, early intervention teams, school staffs and with parents.

In 2024, 16 VTs for the blind/visually impaired supported nearly 1,400 children; 32 (whole time equivalent) VTs for the deaf/hard of hearing supported over 5,000 children (see Table 13).

Table 13: Number of Children Supported by Visiting Teachers by Setting

Setting	Blind/Visually Impaired Children	Deaf/Hard of Hearing Children
Babies/Pre-School/Other	89	609
Primary School	620	2,333
Post-Primary School	432	1,784
Special School	239	522
Total Children	1,380	5,248

FEAPDA Congress

The 27th Joint FEAPDA Congress was held in the Grand Hotel, Malahide, Co Dublin, on 25-27 April 2024. Co-hosted by the NCSE and BATOD (British Association of Teachers of the Deaf), its theme was Exploring the Diversity of Deaf Learners in their Many Lives: Implications for Our Knowledge and Practice.

Hundreds of delegates from Ireland, Europe and elsewhere attended. They heard about deaf education in Ireland, FEAPDA president Leo De Raeve presented on current trends in deaf education across Europe and Prof Ruth Swanick, Leeds University School of Education, UK, spoke on communication among deaf children in Ghana.



Bishopstown Community School ISL Choir receiving an ovation from delegates.

Each of the three days a keynote address was followed by informative presentations and enthusiastic workshops discussions. Congress languages included English, Irish Sign Language (ISL), British Sign Language (BSL) and interpretation was provided in International Sign (IS). Main presentations included:

- ▶ Developments in Deaf Education in Ireland – (Madeline Hickey and John Culhane, both NCSE).
- ▶ Building Expertise with Parents of People with Deafblindness by Prof Saskia Damen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands.
- ▶ The Emotional Wellbeing of Deaf Children and Young People – Dr Bronagh Byrne, Queen's University Belfast.



FEAPDA president Leo De Raeve (left) officially opening the 27th FEAPDA Congress; John Kearney, NCSE chief executive, welcoming delegates to Dublin's Congress; and a group photo of NCSE visiting teachers.



Madeline Hickey of the NCSE delivering a keynote speech.

Throughout the event, many papers, posters and presentations focused on: students social/emotional development, language/literacy development, technology, sign language and deaf blindness, professionals working in deaf education and emerging research.



NCSE's Gerard Hogan and Jan Fitzpatrick studying poster presentations.

The congress underscored the importance of an inclusive, adaptable approach to deaf education, highlighting that deaf and hard of hearing learners benefited from education policies and practices that recognise their unique cultural and linguistic identities while also providing equitable opportunities for social, academic and emotional development. The event culminated in a collective call to action for policy makers, educators and advocates to continue working towards a more inclusive, supportive and adaptable education system for these students.



Bridge Interpreters demonstrating their expertise.

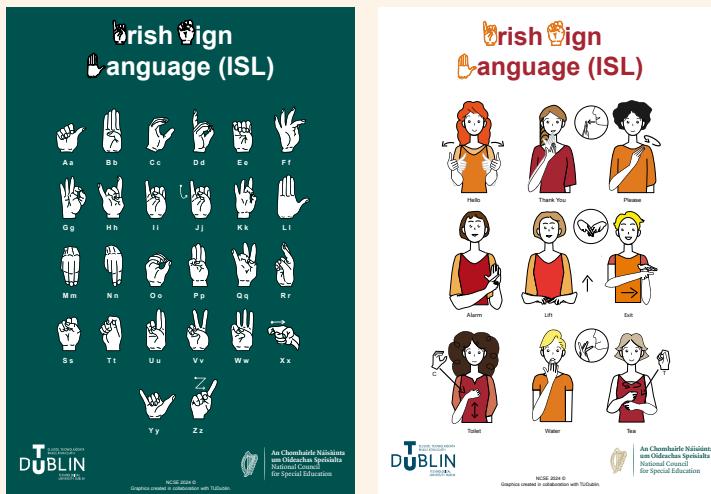
Development of Irish Sign Language (ISL) Resources for the 27th Joint FEAPDA Congress

Irish Sign Language (ISL), like its British counterpart BSL, is a complete language that has developed over hundreds of years in Ireland. It has its own set of signs, grammatical rules and cultural traditions. Not directly related to either spoken English or Irish, in 2017, the Irish Sign Language Act was passed, recognising ISL as its own language.

At the beginning of 2024, a new role of ISL adviser was created in the NCSE. Its aim is to promote ISL capacity in schools and in Ireland's wider education community. This coincided perfectly with preparations for the FEAPDA Congress in Malahide, Dublin.

The NCSE and TU Dublin initiated a partnership to create a project framework that integrated academic learning with practical application.

Figure 19: Irish Sign Language Posters



TU Dublin and the NCSE met to develop two posters for the FEAPDA event: an ISL alphabet, and common words and phrases. They also created videos for the conference in (ISL) and International Sign and videos for the NCSE's bank of ISL resources on their YouTube channel.

2.2.5 Developing the NCSE Behaviour Framework

Work was finalised on the NCSE Behaviour Framework-NCSE Relate. There were engagements with school on the Student Voice and also with the AslAm youth leadership team. These engagements were represented in the Students Say sections of Relate. In March 2024 elements of NCSE Relate were presented to the European schools special education coordinators in Brussels. These elements are coordinated into their schoolwide training. A final consultation with the NCSE's Consultative Forum took place in October 2024.

Presentations on NCSE Relate were facilitated at the joint managerial bodies and Irish Primary Principals Network conferences as well as a suite of professional learning provided to Irish National Teachers Organisation members. The NCSE was represented on the Tusla Education Support Services code of behaviour steering group and several engagements took place to plan the inclusion of NCSE Relate in the code's forthcoming guidelines.

Figure 20: NCSE Relate at Irish Primary Principals Network Conference



A number of videos were produced to accompany Relate with schools featuring in the solution-focused goal setting tool video and the Spotlite student voice video.

Relate forms the scope of practice for the behaviour for learning and wellbeing team. With this in mind, the team increased services to schools to include a sustained support model to special and post-primary schools.

NCSE Behaviour Practitioner Support

From September to December four behaviour practitioners gave sustained support based on NCSE Relate to 46 special schools in the east and south. Behaviour practitioners also supported the enhanced in-school therapy services pilot. On 16 August 2024, Government announced the first phase of this pilot to include six schools in Dublin and Cork which were included in the behaviour practitioner caseload.

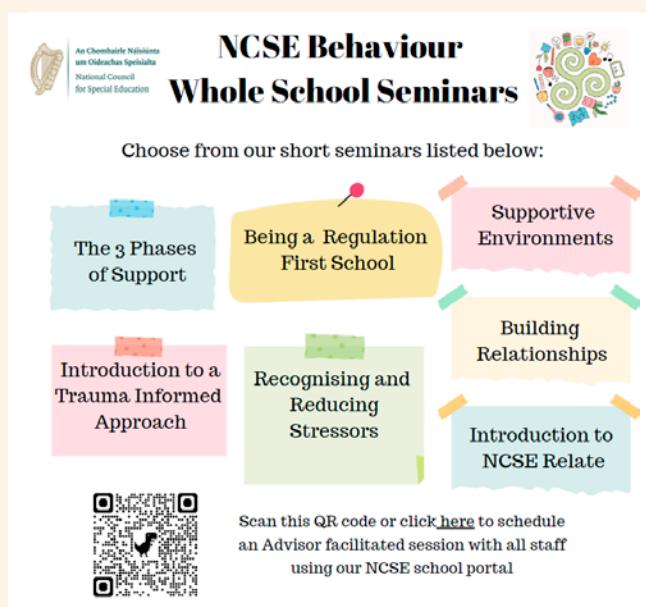
Behaviour practitioners have provided the following sustained support to special schools in the pilot:

- ▶ bespoke teacher professional learning
- ▶ facilitating communities of practice
- ▶ regular contact through school visits and virtual meetings.

Special School Support

In September 2024 autism advisers and behaviour practitioners gave a two-day training to teachers and SNAs in the four new special schools. A series of six two-hour online sustained support whole-school sessions were then planned. All special schools, including the four new ones, were invited to register for this (see flyer below).

Figure 21: NCSE Behaviour Seminars



Post-Primary Behaviour

Seventy post-primary schools continue to be resourced by the Department of Education with a behaviour for learning teacher. The NCSE's behaviour for learning and wellbeing team initiated a programme of support based on NCSE Relate for all post-primary schools that are allocating a minimum of 11 SET hours to behaviour support in their school.

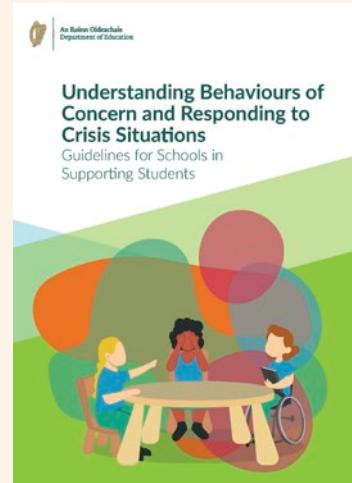
The programme involves an assigned behaviour for learning and wellbeing adviser to enable the school to set up a positive behaviour support team, provide bespoke training and facilitate communities of practice along with sustained support for a two-year period until May 2026.

Sixty-nine additional post-primary schools now avail of the Behaviour for Learning Hours programme. There are now 139 post-primary schools throughout the State receiving sustained NCSE support.

Figure 22: Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations (2024)

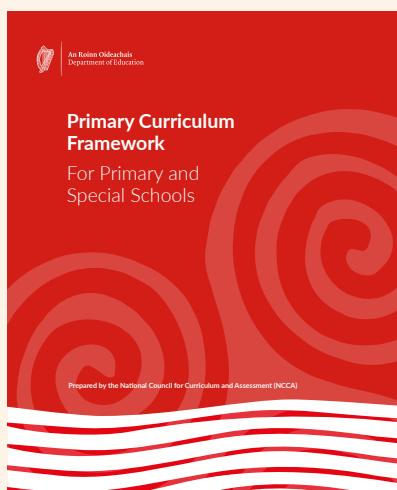
Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations – Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) Training

The Department of Education guidelines for Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations (December 2024) was piloted with 15 schools before publication. Along with this pilot, the NCSE launched a successful tender resulting in the procurement of the Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) to deliver whole school training to special schools.



2.2.6 Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF)

The Primary Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2023) provides the foundation for high-quality learning, teaching and assessment for all children attending primary and special schools. The framework continued to underpin the work of the NCSE's primary curriculum team in supporting curricular implementation in primary and special schools throughout 2024.

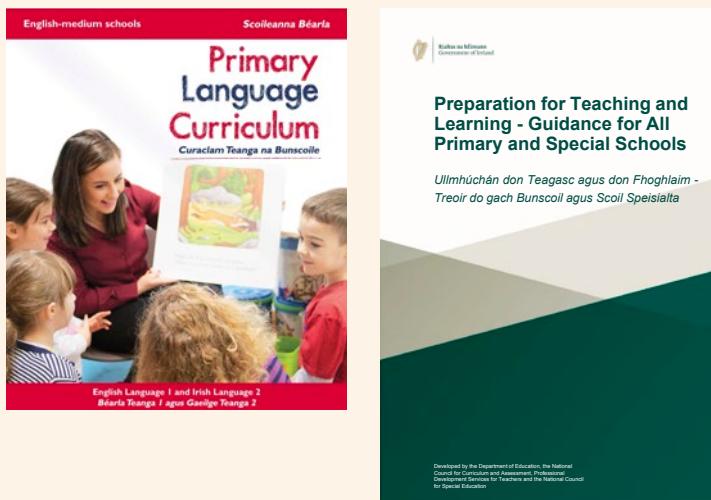


2.2.7 Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)

Primary Language Curriculum Sustained Support for Special Schools 2024

The Primary Language Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 2019) is an inclusive language curriculum for all primary level children attending primary and special schools. In 2024, NCSE primary curriculum advisers completed phase 4 of PLC sustained support for teachers and school leaders in 14 special schools. This support focused on facilitating implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum in special school settings, in addition to promoting Preparation for Teaching and Learning Guidance for all Primary and Special Schools (2021).

Figure 23: Primary Language Curriculum (2019). Preparation for Teaching and Learning Guidance (2021)



Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Seminars and School Support 2023

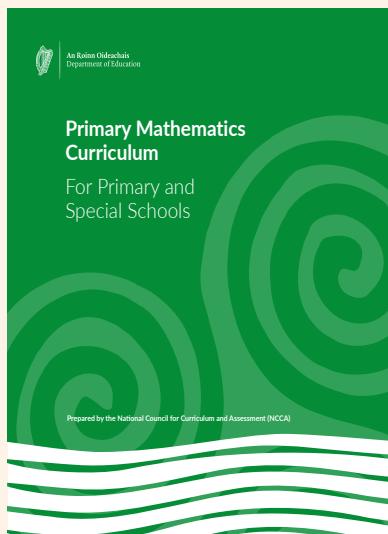
In 2024, three TPL online evening seminars were provided for teachers and school leaders to support implementation of the primary language curriculum (2019) in primary and special schools. This was the response of NCSE primary curriculum advisers to requests from primary and special schools. Seminars to support implementation were also provided as part of the postgraduate diploma in continuing professional development programmes, run by the School of Education, University College Dublin, and the School of Special and Inclusive Education, Dublin City University.

2.2.8 Primary Mathematics Curriculum (PMC)

The Primary Mathematics Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 2023) is inclusive of all children attending primary and special schools. In 2024, the NCSE primary curriculum team facilitated delivery of national CPD to support introduction of the primary mathematics curriculum to special schools. The NCSE facilitated 67 professional learning seminars, attended by 1,471 participants (teachers and school leaders) from 140 special schools, to support the curriculum's introduction in 2024.

In addition, the NCSE facilitated design and delivery of national CPD to support implementation of the primary mathematics curriculum in special schools, in line with circular 0039/2023. The NCSE ran 16 professional learning seminars attended by 427 participants (teachers and school leaders) from 47 special schools, to support implementation in 2024.

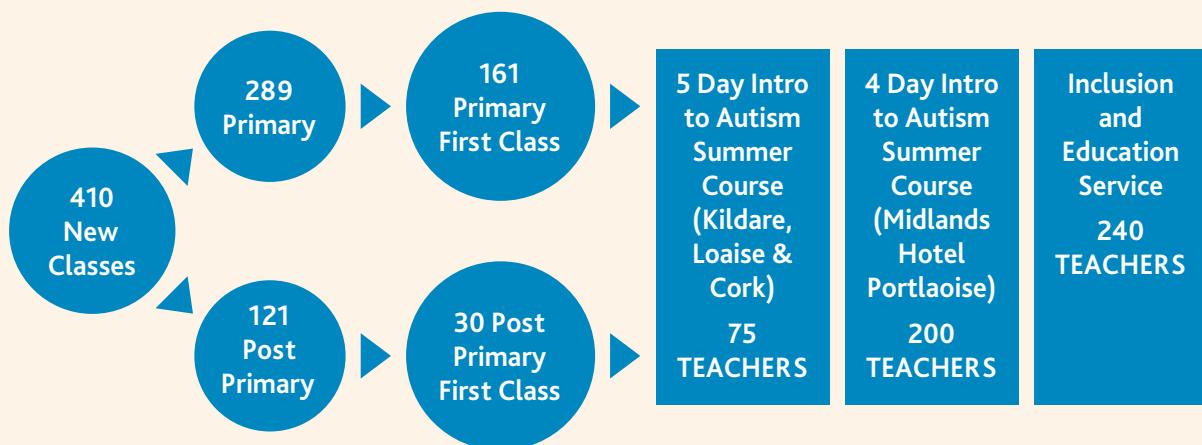
Figure 24: Primary Mathematics Curriculum (2023)



2.2.9 NCSE Supports Schools with Special Classes for Autistic Students

The NCSE provided a range of supports for the teachers in new special classes. Supports included:

- ▶ five-day summer course for primary teachers
- ▶ four-day introduction to autism for primary and post-primary teachers
- ▶ two-day introduction to autism for primary and post-primary teachers



NCSE support is sustained for these teachers by adviser school support visits and facilitating communities of practice.

Figure 25: NCSE Summer Course Autism July and August 2024

Supports for Schools Establishing their First Special Class for Autistic Students

The NCSE offers a comprehensive package of supports for schools opening their first class for autistic students. Please see below the arrangements for accessing this package of supports in the 2024/25 academic year as follows.

A Summer Course - 5 Day Introduction to Autism for Newly Appointed Special Class teachers of a School's First Autism Class:

Kildare Education Centre	Laois Education Centre	Cork Education Centre
8th - 12th July 9:30 AM - 2:00 PM EPV Days	8th - 12th July 9:30 AM - 2:00 PM EPV Days	12th - 16th August 9:30 AM - 2:00 PM EPV Days
Registration and more information at ncse.ie or scan the code.	Registration and more information at ncse.ie or scan the code.	Registration and more information at ncse.ie or scan the code.

The 4 day Introduction to Autism for Newly Appointed Special Class Teachers of a School's First Autism Class(es):

A further opportunity for newly appointed special class teachers of a school's first autism class(es) at both primary and post-primary levels to attend the Introduction to Autism seminar will be available in September 2024. This seminar will be delivered on four days over two weeks.

Registration will only be available to a newly appointed teacher of a school's first autism class and who has not attended the summer courses.

Newly Established Classes will also be able to avail of:

- Advisory Support
- Participation Days
- Community Provision
- EPV Days

Registration and more information will soon be available on [ncse.ie/tpl](#).

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SEMINARS

For teachers who are new to teaching in an already established class, there are many courses available through the TPL calendar. The Introduction to Autism for New Special Class Teachers seminar will be provided in multiple ways and multiple times during the 2024/25 year.

Registration and more information will soon be available on [ncse.ie/tpl](#).

 An Chóchairle Náisiúnta in Oideachas Spéisialta
National Council for Special Education

Figure 26: 4 Day Introduction to Autism, Midlands Hotel, Portlaoise, Co Laois



In 2024 the NCSE and Middletown Centre for Autism, Co Armagh, facilitated a series of sustained support workshops for experienced special class teachers. These were hosted nationally in 20 primary and post-primary schools. Teachers benefited from NCSE and the centre's facilitation to further their knowledge and understanding of autistic learners.

The importance of having autism supports is becoming evident in initial teaching education (ITE) and reflected by the specialist lead for autism being an advisory board member for the postgraduate masters in education in Trinity College, Dublin. In March 2024 the board was invited to meet the Trinity's provost Linda Doyle.

Figure 27: Postgraduate in Masters in Education Advisory Board Meeting with Trinity College Provost



A pathway for postgraduate qualification for teachers in autism is available through the NCSE. They can attend NCSE seminars and enrol in a postgraduate SEN in Autism programme via St Angela's Atlantic Technological University, Co Sligo.

Inclusive practices for those with autism are at the heart of NCSE supports in the area. Student experiences are vital to enriching these supports. NCSE advisers made a video interview with a young student who explained how an adapted uniform helped her be regulated and included in her school (available on the NCSE [YouTube channel](#)⁷).

2.3 Consultation and Engagement with stakeholders

Objective – Engage in extensive consultation with our education stakeholders, including our Consultative Forum, parents, students and advocacy groups and draw on expert knowledge and advice.

The NCSE engages and consults with a wide range of bodies, agencies, organisations, and groups as part of the provision of services and resources for students with special educational needs.

2.3.1 NCSE Consultative Forum

The NCSE engages with the Consultative Forum, appointed under the EPSEN Act, on special education matters. The Council appoints up to 17 members following a prescribed consultation process and the Minister appoints a further three.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/@nationalcouncilforspeciale9572/featured>

The forum met twice in 2024 (5 March and 8 October – Table 14 reflects attendance). Topics covered are wide and varied across the meetings: the NCSE inclusive framework and policy advice, NCSE Relate behaviour guidelines, the redevelopment of the NCSE website and its data strategy.

Table 14: Membership and Attendance, Consultative Forum Meetings, 2024

NCSE Consultative Forum

Council-appointed Members	Attendance	
Dr James Casey	Independent Living Movement Ireland	1
Dr Miriam Colum	Lecturer, special educational needs, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin	1
Marina Cusack	Special educational needs coordinator, post-primary	0
Paddy Greally	Retired children's services manager, Brothers of Charity	2
Council-appointed Members	Attendance	
Miriam Jennings	Special needs schools and classes	2
Patricia McCarthy	Inclusion in education and society research team, Trinity College, Dublin	0
Catherine Moynihan	Research and development officer, Joint Managerial Body (JMB)	2
Dr Finn Ó Murchú	Head, School of Education (post-primary), Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick	2
Brian O'Doherty	President, Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)	1
Sheila Murphy	Acting assistant general secretary, Irish National Teacher's Organisation (INTO)	2
Derval McDonagh	Chief executive officer, Inclusion Ireland	1
Gerry Maley	National disability specialist, HSE	0
Matt Melvin	Director, Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, CPSMA	1
Darren Murphy	Team Leader, Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)	1
Anna Ní Chartúir	Special educational needs coordinator, Gaeltacht primary school	0
Maureen Smith	NCSE staff representative – team manager	2
Dr Joe Travers	Associate Professor, School of Inclusive and Special Education, Dublin City University	2

Members Appointed by Minister for Education		Attendance
Pauline Kerins	Senior psychologist, National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)	1
Lisa White	Senior inspector, Inspectorate, Department of Education	2
Andrina Donovan	Assistant principal officer, special education section, Department of Education	2

2.3.2 European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

The NCSE continued to support the work of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE). This independent organisation, facilitating collaboration for departments of education in its member countries, supports the progression of more inclusive education systems. This is facilitated through key areas of policy, practice, and research – providing an evidence base for the implementation of inclusive education.

During 2024, the NCSE continually engaged with EASNIE on key events and requirements.

- ▶ Attendance at the EASNIE bi-annual conferences
- ▶ Spring event – Estonia – May 2024
- ▶ Autumn event – Poland – November 2024
- ▶ Provision of information on special and inclusive education in Ireland to EASNIE and individual member-states.
- ▶ Publication of key inclusion data with the European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education.

Barbara Nugent, NCSE's specialist lead for primary education and curriculum, took over the role of national coordinator for Ireland in October 2024.

A key activity for 2024 was continued engagement with representative board members and national coordinators on the project: Monitoring and Evaluation Systems in Inclusive Education Policy (MESIEP). MESIEP activity focuses on the general topic of monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education.

Ireland is part of the Cluster 2 team which includes Ireland, Croatia, Malta, Serbia, UK-England.

During 2024, phases 1 and 2 of the cluster focused on how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of inclusive education could serve policy development.

Throughout 2024, activity concentrated on policy and on how respective institutions under ministries of education and institutions external to ministries of education, monitor and evaluate inclusion. This cluster activity continues into 2025.

Ireland's involvement in key projects and activities with EASNIE have been identified for 2025.



Pictured at EASNIE's biannual conference in Warsaw, Poland, May 2024, from left: Don Mahon, chair, EASNIE; Cor JW Meijir, director, EASNIE; NCSE's Barbara Nugent, national EASNIE coordinator for Ireland; and Brendan Doody, Ireland's board representative.

2.4 NCSE Research Programme

Objective – Produce an annual programme of commissioned and in-house research to inform the work of the organisation.

Research into special education is a core statutory function for the NCSE. The research programme expands knowledge and understanding of best practice and actively contributes to the NCSE's work plan. Research gives an insight into complex processes, involves relevant stakeholders from across the education system and can highlight what works best in other jurisdictions. Deriving knowledge from research provides the NCSE with a strong evidence base to inform policy advice to the Minister for Education. The NCSE continues to disseminate work through its website, publications and research conference.

In 2024, a new study was commissioned to evaluate the Universal Design for Learning support model and the Towards Inclusion pilot programme. This section provides an overview of this ongoing work as well as highlighting newly commissioned research.

In 2024, the NCSE commissioned a new study evaluating the Universal Design for Learning support model and began to evaluate the Towards Inclusion pilot programme.

2.4.1 New Research

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Support Model Pilot

The NCSE's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) support model is a bespoke pilot programme being implemented across 44 schools. It aims to improve teaching and learning for all students in a way that is proactive and encourages diversity of learners. Started in September 2024, it will run for two school years.

The NCSE has commissioned an external evaluation of the UDL model to ascertain what aspects are working; to identify possible improvements; and to determine and understand its impact on student, teacher, classroom and school. A consortium from Edge Hill University, Lancashire, England, and University College Cork will complete the evaluation. It will collate, document and review the processes that underpin the pilot's delivery to establish if it is meeting its objectives. In 2024 the evaluation team focused on designing data collection instruments and securing ethical approval. Data collection began in early 2025.

Towards Inclusion Pilot Evaluation

Towards Inclusion (TI) is a pilot programme with ten school clusters each containing one mainstream and one special school. Its aim is to explore inclusive practices between local schools, sharing expertise and developing new opportunities for teachers and students to collaborate, learn and deepen relationships through curriculum focused activities. This pilot started in 2024 to span the academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25.

The NCSE research and evaluation team began to design an evaluation plan for this in 2024. This included designing instruments to collect data for the evaluation and developing data protection and privacy documents to guide the evaluation. Data collection for this evaluation began early 2025.

2.4.2 Ongoing Research in 2024

Evaluation of the NCSE's Frontline Services

The NCSE commissioned an evaluation of frontline services to gain insight into how its stakeholders view and experience these along with their perceived impact on students and school staff. The findings are based on the perspectives of multiple service users including parents/carers, school staff and students with special educational needs.

The outcome shows NCSE frontline services are well aligned with service user needs and Ireland's progress towards establishing a world-class, inclusive education system. The report notes, however, that this is true only when services are functioning effectively, are personalised, responsive and adequately resourced. The evaluation also finds NCSE frontline services are the right shape for Ireland, but their size and consistency of quality need attention. The findings identify several areas as potential priorities for continuous improvement and notes that the NCSE transformation programme, Vision 26, provides a framework to drive these improvements. Evaluation findings were presented at the NCSE staff conference 2024 and the NCSE Research Conference 2024. The report will be published in 2025.

Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) Transition Pilot Programme Evaluation

The CES Transitions Study is a pilot supporting the transitions of young people with disabilities with their post-school options. Two cohorts are involved: the first began in the 2022-23 school year involving mainstream and special schools; the second involves special schools only and began in the 2024-25 school year.

An externally commissioned evaluation of the CES Transitions Study Pilot for cohort one began in 2023 and continued into 2024. In 2024 students in cohort 1 moved from their in-school to their post-school phase and their progress was followed by the evaluation team six to nine months after leaving school. In 2024 the team completed the in-school phase working with schools, students and parents. Planning and preparations for data collection with students and stakeholders for this cohort in the post-school phase also took place during 2024.

Mapping and Tracking Students with Special Educational Needs After They Leave School

This study was commissioned in 2020 to examine the experiences and the post-school destinations of school leavers with special educational needs. Its aim was to provide a unique evidence base to inform work to support planning and service provision for inclusion of young people with educational needs at this important juncture in their lives.

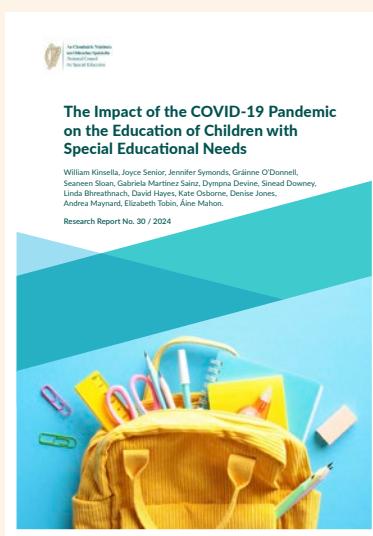
In 2024, the report was finalised and underwent the standard NCSE review process. The revised version was approved in late 2024 and prepared for publication in early 2025.

Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Special Educational Needs

This is the first of two reports arising from NCSE commissioned research to examine the pandemic's impact on students with special educational needs in Ireland. It utilises data collected through surveys and interviews specifically for this project, and secondary data from the Children's School Lives study. The study found some positives, for example some students reporting being more comfortable learning at home and benefits around reduced anxiety for others, particularly those who enjoyed fewer restrictions in their behaviours (for example, stimming, moving, taking breaks). However, the report finds gaps in support. Furthermore, students with additional needs in Ireland fared less well than those without and experienced challenges that negatively affected their learning and wellbeing, during and immediately after school closure periods.

The findings contain important evidence for all involved in educating students with special educational needs in Ireland, both in supporting them throughout their education and reviewing the system response and preparedness for possible pandemic crises in the future.

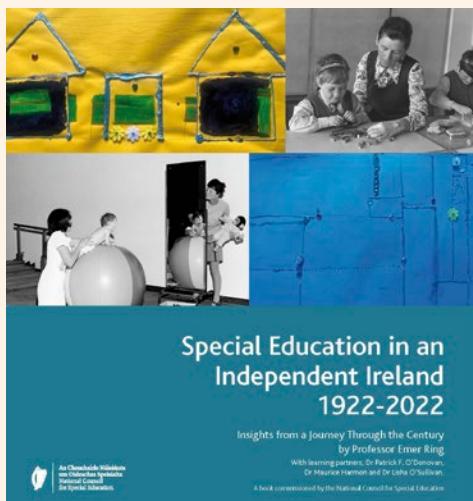
The report from the first study covering the early years of the pandemic was published in 2024. A second report arising from the study that focused on the continued impact of the pandemic on the learning and wellbeing of children in the later years (2022-23) was finalised in 2024 and will be published late 2025. This follow-up study continues to investigate the potential and ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and in particular the school closures on the education and wellbeing of children with special educational needs in both mainstream and special schools. The NCSE approved a draft of this report in late 2024; the final version will be published in late 2025.



Documenting the History of Special Education in Ireland over 100 Years (2024)

The NCSE commissioned this book (see graphic) to document the history and progress of special education in Ireland, covering 100 years since the foundation of the State in 1922. It examines the evolution of policies, practices and experiences of children and families, with a focus on the past two decades. As well as the documentary evidence, it includes significant and interesting contributions from a range of key informants.

Incorporating a vast range of developments, the publication covers key periods in the development of special and inclusive education in Ireland while situating it within the wider social, cultural, economic and educational context. The detail on legislative and policy aspects of the evolution of Irish special education across recent decades and the change and progression since the 1990s is a key facet of the book and its wider contribution. It also presents a unique and timely contribution within the context of the NCSE, aligning with the 20-year anniversary of our establishment as an independent statutory body.



New Practice-Based Research Initiative

The NCSE's Practice-Based Research (PBR) pilot has multiple aims: to build the research capacity and skills of practising educators; to enhance inclusive and special education teaching and learning experiences for teachers and learners through exploring, reviewing, conducting or applying research/research evidence; building and enhancing relationships between higher education institutes (HEIs) and schools; and developing a repository of practice-based research evidence and shared learning and experiences.

The NCSE has contacted four HEIs to support school teachers conduct research at a practice level. In 2024, 13 schools were supported, including eight post-primary, four primary and one special. In late 2024 the programme was expanded to include a fifth HEI working with an additional seven schools (five post-primary, one primary and one special). Schools are conducting research on a range of topics to do with inclusion and special education. A pilot evaluation begun in late 2024 is continuing into 2025. It is anticipated that it will be rolled out nationally in late 2025.

2.4.3 Research Conference 2024



John Kearney, NCSE chief executive, with Dr Fergal Lynch, chairperson, at the NCSE Research Conference 2024.

The NCSE's Research Conference 2024 took place 6 November at the Gibson Hotel, Dublin. Primarily an in-person event, it had an online livestream available for delegates to attend virtually. Last year's theme was: The Progressive Realisation of an Inclusive Education System in Ireland: The new NCSE and Vision 2026.



Clockwise from top: Prof Lani Florian, Prof Deborah Robinson and Dr Lisha O'Sullivan to delegates presenting at NCSE's Research Conference 2024.

NCSE's chair Dr Fergal Lynch shared a conference introduction and welcome. Session 1 was introduced by Dr Peter Archer, NCSE research committee chair, and included presentations from four speakers. Prof Lani Florian, Bell Chair of Education Emerita, Scotland's University of Edinburgh, spoke on empowering teachers to promote inclusive and equitable education. Prof Deborah Robinson, University of Strathclyde, Scotland, and Dr Lisha O'Sullivan, Mary Immaculate College, Co Limerick, presented the findings on stakeholder views of the NCSE from its independent evaluation of its own frontline services. Chief Executive of NCSE John Kearney gave an address on a world class inclusive education system for Ireland, outlining progress with the NCSE's expansion and vision for 2026.

Yvonne Kennedy, NCSE Council member, oversaw the afternoon session that included a presentation from Lucie Cerna, senior analyst in equity and transitions, OECD, who reviewed the move towards inclusive education in Portugal and lessons learned.

Conference closed with a panel discussion on the NCSE Practice-Based Research Programme with NCSE's head of research Jennifer Doran; Dr. Kevin Cahill, senior lecturer, University College Cork; Laura Miskella, post-primary teacher, Ramsgrange Community School, Co Wexford; Ann O'Regan, post-primary teacher, Carrigaline Community School, Co Cork; and Éilis Dillon, principal, St Cecilia's Special School, Co Sligo.



Pictured above L-R: NCSE head of finance, research and governance Jennifer Doran; NCSE chief executive John Kearney; Lucie Cerna; Ann O'Regan; NCSE Council chair Dr Fergal Lynch; Éilis Dillon; Dr Kevin Cahill; and Yvonne Kennedy, NCSE Council member.

Over 110 delegates attended in person with an additional 351 active online streams across the day. Most were in Ireland, the remainder were from the UK, United Arab Emirates and the US. Delegates included principals and teachers, researchers, parents, educational psychologists, advocacy groups, Department officials, access officers, teacher union representatives and therapists.



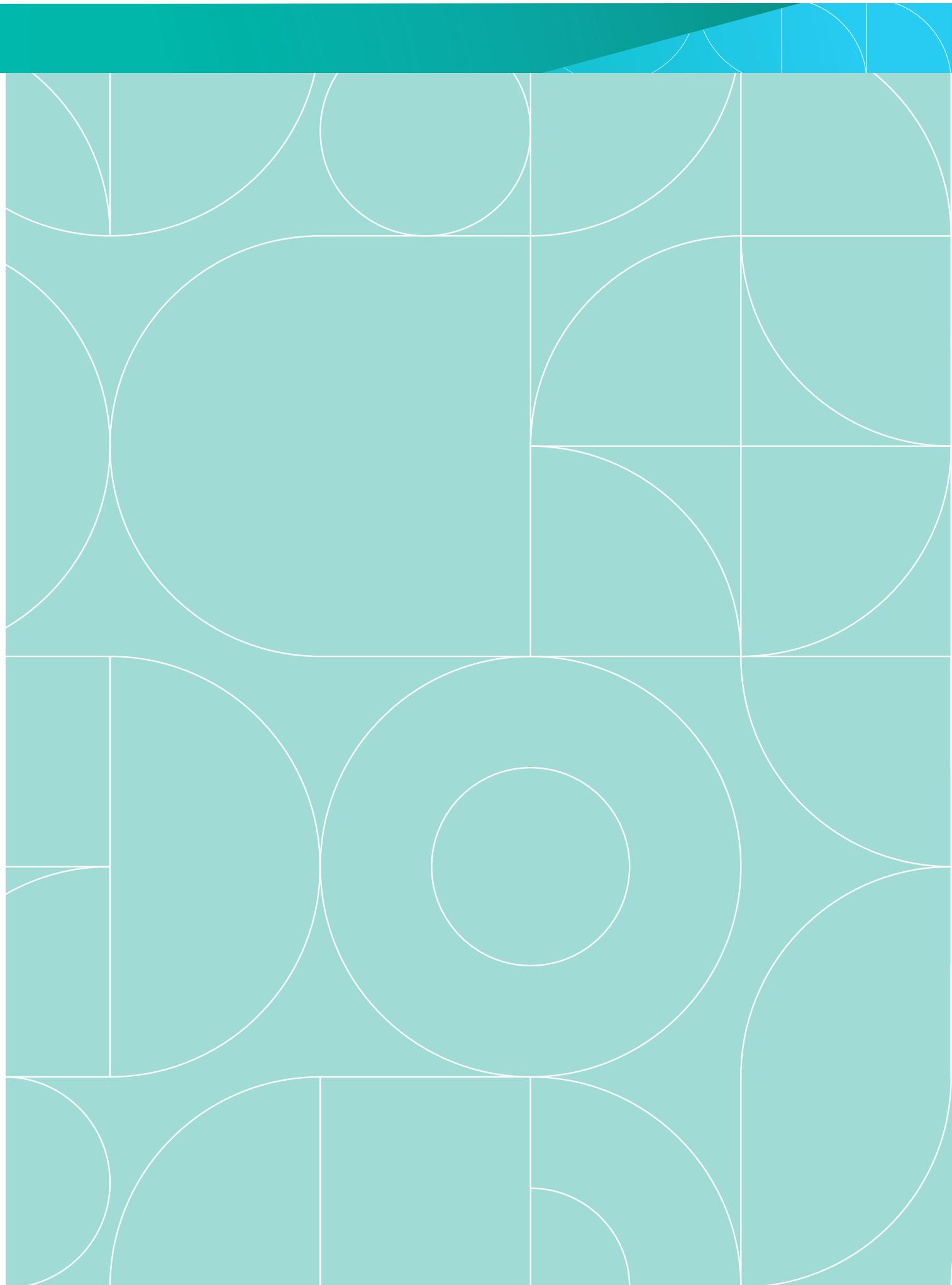
Delegates to NCSE's Research Conference 2024 in the Gibson Hotel, Dublin, networking during proceedings.

2.4.4 Dissemination of Research and Practice to Stakeholders

Senior management and staff across the NCSE engage in special education issues as part of their work, attending external events, conferences, participating in a wide range of advisory, steering and working groups across the organisation's five pillars.

As noted in section 4.4.2, redesigning the NCSE website continued in 2024. The NCSE maintains a Twitter/X presence to ensure dissemination and engagement on key issues and publication of guidelines, resources and notifications on upcoming events.

The NCSE communications team coordinates responses to parliamentary questions, REPs, and Minister enquiries, in addition to media queries, Freedom of Information requests and customer complaints and feedback.



Strategic Goal 3:

Staff Development, Support and Leadership

Strategic Goal 3 – Staff Development, Support and Leadership

Develop a progressive workplace culture in collaboration with staff to embed effective leadership and best practice.

The NCSE sets out four objectives and 11 key actions related to Strategic Goal 3, Staff Development, Support and Leadership, in its Statement of Strategy 2023-26.

Goal 3 – Objectives and Actions

Objective	Action
1. Develop the systems to recruit and retain staff with the necessary and desired skills and expertise to deliver NCSE strategic objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review role profiles to ensure NCSE attracts people whose skills, competencies and values are aligned to requirements. 2. Utilise effective selection techniques to ensure recruitment is both efficient and effective.
2. Provide corporate induction, mentoring and professional development to equip and empower staff to provide effective services and to pursue innovation and growth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop tailored induction programmes for different staffing groups. 2. Provide the opportunities for staff training and professional learning and mentoring through a structured suite of learning and development supports. 3. Implement the appropriate talent management supports that enable staff to grow and develop in their current roles and to progress in their professional career.
3. Promote a positive working culture which instils constancy of purpose regarding vision and strategic plans of the organisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement a coherent communications strategy and create opportunities for collaborative working across the organisation 2. Lead on principles of organisational culture across each pillar 3. Align all staff members to the principles of a positive working culture with commitment to a shared vision and strategy at the relevant strata within a TQM framework.
4. Develop systems and structures to instil inclusion, wellbeing, equality, communication and diversity in leadership and organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement a people strategy to support the delivery of a positive working culture 2. Develop a dedicated equality, diversity and inclusion strategy and action plan. 3. Define and disseminate shared systems across the relevant pillars that underpin organisational values

3.1 Introduction

Throughout 2024, the NCSE continued to develop its organisation and promote a progressive workplace culture, in collaboration with staff, to embed effective leadership and best practice across all teams.

This section outlines activities in these areas during the year.

3.2 Workforce Planning and Recruitment

Objective – Develop the systems to recruit and retain staff with the necessary and desired skills and expertise to deliver NCSE strategic objectives.

3.2.1 Workforce Planning

The NCSE has completed a strategic workforce plan (SWP) and a detailed organisational design. The plan's fundamental objective is to ensure that the new organisational structure is optimally resourced. This was achieved through a robust assessment of demand for NCSE services that took place under the SWP. This assessment outlines required level of resources in a geographical area and on a county basis and, importantly, will ensure that SENO grades are assigned clearly identifiable county caseloads.

The above will also ensure that resources are matched more appropriately to current day demands which will in turn ensure equitable distribution of caseloads across all SENO grades. This will allow management to plan for future increases in demand so that resources are assigned in a timely way to address demand arising which will help ensure any time lag between demand increases and the increase in staff numbers.

The workforce planning section plays a vital role in making sure the NCSE has the right people with the right skills in the right roles to meet the evolving needs of students with special educational needs. Its work is guided by the principals set out in the NCSE's Strategic Workforce Plan, effectively a roadmap for building a sustainable, agile and well-supported workforce capable of delivering on the NCSE mission.

In 2024 the section focused on key areas to align with the strategic workforce plan:

- ▶ capacity building for special education services
- ▶ enhanced recruitment strategies
- ▶ professional development
- ▶ support for workforce wellbeing.

Through proactive planning, strategic alignment and an overall commitment to the NCSE, the section is helping to lay the foundation for the NCSE vision of a world class education system for Ireland.

3.2.2 NCSE Recruitment

The NCSE saw significant growth and development in 2024 marked by a series of successful internal and external recruitment competitions. As a result, it welcomed 173 new colleagues across a wide range of roles, reinforcing its commitment to service delivery excellence.

Recruitment efforts brought in:

- ▶ 38 advisers
- ▶ 6 assistant principals
- ▶ 19 clerical officers
- ▶ 4 executive officers
- ▶ 5 higher executive officers
- ▶ 3 Irish Sign Language (ISL) advisers/SCS
- ▶ 75 special education needs organisers
- ▶ 15 team managers
- ▶ 9 visiting teachers
- ▶ 2 specialist leads.

These recruits bring valuable skills, expertise and fresh perspectives to NCSE, enhancing its ability to support and rely on its service users.

Additionally, in 2024 several newly developed roles were introduced, reflecting strategic priorities and evolving needs. We successfully appointed two national coordinators and one national development lead for sensory, reinforcing our capacity to deliver specialised support in key areas.

The NCSE remains committed to recognising and nurturing talent from within. Through internal competitions, 22 staff members were promoted to key roles providing opportunities for career progressing and ensuring teams continue to benefit from experienced leadership and organisational knowledge.

This year's recruitment and promotion outcomes highlight ongoing efforts to attract, develop and retain a skilled and dedicated NCSE workforce performing to the highest standards and continuing to drive its mission forward.

3.3 Staff Engagement and Professional Development

Objective – Provide corporate induction, mentoring and professional development to equip and empower staff to provide effective services and to pursue innovation and growth.

A pivotal NCSE focus in 2024 was to foster a culture of staff engagement and professional development. The NCSE outlined ambitions in this area through strategic goals within its statement of strategy, serving as a roadmap for enhancing service delivery, practices and outcomes. This statement emphasises the importance of developing and supporting staff to ensure they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their roles and those of NCSE service users. The NCSE recognises that the effectiveness of its work is directly linked to staff skills, knowledge and motivation. By prioritising professional development, it seeks to create an environment where staff feel valued, supported and empowered to deliver on achieving the NCSE Vision 2026.

3.3.1 NCSE Induction Programmes

In 2024 in alignment with commitment to staff development and excellence in service delivery, the NCSE was pleased to present a comprehensive new programme of induction and training. Initially, this targeted the large intake of new SENO staff members, but a similar programme was then run for the visiting teachers and advisers. The initiative not only enhances the workforce's competency, but reinforces NCSE values and service standards. Through the diligent work of the team in pillar 1 and colleagues in pillar 3, a thorough assessment was conducted to identify the specific training needs of the initial grade. Feedback from current employees, supervisors and industry benchmarks informed design of training modules to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

The NCSE invested significantly in this training, most of which internal colleagues provided because they are knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects. The NCSE also sourced relevant external providers to support the work of internal teams. By equipping employees with the necessary tools and knowledge, the NCSE is not only enhancing individual capabilities, but also fostering a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in service delivery.

The successful rollout of the induction and training programme marks a significant milestone in commitment to staff development and operational excellence. The NCSE looks forward to expanding this initiative and continuing to foster a culture of learning and growth within its ranks.

3.3.2 Staff Training and Professional Learning

In 2024 the NCSE invested significantly in training initiatives, focusing on a diverse array of disciplines essential to organisational growth. The past year has been a milestone for the training unit, marked by successful delivery of comprehensive training support to staff across various key areas essential for professional development. In focus were traditional

topics such as leadership skills, compliance training, effective communication, technical skills enhancement and customer service excellence. This multifaceted approach to training has ensured that all staff members had opportunities to receive the resources necessary to thrive in their roles.

During the year, the NCSE provided all civil servant staff with access to OneLearning and its comprehensive catalogue of training courses ranging from topics on civil service essentials to people management, IT skills, health, wellbeing and professional development, among the 111 course themes it provides. The NCSE also funded a robust refund of fees scheme to upskill staff and provide all with access to undergraduate, postgraduate and professional development opportunities. Alongside this, it offered statutory training in areas such as protected disclosures and health and safety, as well as a significant investment in access to postgraduate programmes specifically aimed at visiting teacher colleagues and a robust programme of training geared towards the needs of specific grades and the new pillars. To maximise engagement and retention, training initiatives employed a variety of delivery methods including interactive workshops, e-learning modules and on-the-job training sessions. These diverse formats catered to different learning styles, allowing NCSE employees to absorb information effectively and apply it in their daily tasks.

3.3.3 NCSE Staff Conference 2024

In October 2024, the NCSE hosted a two-day staff conference on the theme Quality Relationships and Quality Services.

Inaugurated by Minister for Special Education Hildegard Naughton, it featured an address from NCSE Council chair Dr Fergal Lynch. Keynote speaker was Dervla McDonagh, chief executive of Inclusion Ireland, who presented on Nurturing Inclusion, focused on how people can work together courageously towards a more inclusive society.

There were presentations on service delivery and changes, including items on NCSE therapy and NCS Relate. Staff had an overview of NCSE research and practice based research developments and updates. Drs Deborah Robinson and Geraldene Codina presented findings on a commissioned research project dealing with the impact of NCSE frontline services based on stakeholder experiences.

Discussions on ongoing organisational transformation and reflections on the NCSE Vision 2026 were engaging, as were a presentation on the NCSE's People Plan and an address on public services reform by NCSE colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Sessions focused on IT developments and practical assistance, the NCSE data strategy and responses to litigation and legal trends. There was even time for work on mentalisation and staff wellbeing.

A key seminar was the one on Total Quality Management (TQM), making all staff aware of its advantages and giving an overview of progress to date on national projects aimed at efficiencies in service delivery. Everyone had an opportunity to engage in a live TQM workshop, managed and delivered by the in-house TQM mobilisation team.



CEO John Kearney presenting and staff at the NCSE Staff Conference 2024

The successful NCSE event drew a robust attendance and fostered an engaging atmosphere for exchange of ideas and information among speakers and attendees. Participants appreciated the opportunity for cross-disciplinary discussions that enriched dialogue and collaboration across NCSE teams. The feedback collected will play a crucial role in shaping plans for next year's conference, ensuring the NCSE continues to build on this year's success.

3.4 NCSE Communications and Organisational Culture

Objective – Promote a positive working culture that instils constancy of purpose regarding vision and strategic plans of the organisation.

In 2024, as the NCSE launched the first year of its People Plan, the organisation made remarkable progress in cultivating a positive working culture with the new change, communications and engagement team, which became fully staffed in April. Its purpose is to support the strategic objectives as set out in the Statement of Strategy 2023-26, and to facilitate the flow of information and dialogue among employees and leaders.

The NCSE is committed to promoting and continuously improving employee engagement by streamlining communications and keeping everyone connected informed and engaged.

In 2024 the new team created more effective communications and continued to work towards enhancing connections across all pillars using various channels and tools, such as the intranet, an internal mailbox, quarterly news bulletin, staff forums and events, conducting staff surveys and publishing analysis of feedback and results.

The team's goal is to standardise and unify the NCSE's communications approach and framework across organisational pillars to enhance clarity, consistency and alignment with strategic objectives.

3.4.1 Internal Communications Strategy

In 2024, one of the first outputs of the change, communication and engagement team was to introduce a BAU (business as usual) communications approach document across the organisation.

Its key aspects are to:

- ▶ Provide appropriate levels of information to relevant individuals using the most effective mediums and messages.
- ▶ Distribute clear, consistent and aligned communications.
- ▶ Send timely updates to individuals on what to expect in the future and how they will be affected.

Key BAU communication objectives are to:

- ▶ Raise awareness and create visibility of changes and activity across the NCSE by communicating any changes or updates to all stakeholders.
- ▶ Foster a one-team culture and positive experience for all stakeholders with timely and clear communications about ongoing activity, changes and updates.
- ▶ Aid staff in understanding their role and responsibilities and processes.
- ▶ Garner staff support, commitment and engagement.
- ▶ Ensure a smooth transition by communicating in a transparent manner and ensuring stakeholders are clear on project requirements and needs.

To guide the NCSE's internal communications strategy, and in line with the communication principles of TQM, a suite of policy documents was developed. The Internal Communications Policy, Protocol and Procedures document was approved by NCSE Senior Management Team and implemented in July 2024. The document gives clear guidance on appropriate, safe and legitimate use of NCSE's internal communications, email and intranet facilities. It also sets out clear pathways for submission of content, articles and management of internal communication tools.

3.5 NCSE Systems and Organisational Expansion

Objective – Develop systems and structures to instil inclusion, wellbeing, equality, communication and diversity in leadership and organisational culture.

3.5.1 NCSE Systems and People

NCSE People Strategy

A central tenet of the NCSE's transformation programme Vision 2026 is staff support and development, both through organisational restructuring and in respect of staff carrying out their duties on an ongoing basis. Previously in 2023, NCSE management undertook a significant process of staff engagement to establish the necessary supports staff required. On foot of these engagements, the NCSE developed a People Plan to fulfil its vision and continue to grow. This was launched 17 April 2024.

The goals of the People Plan for 2023-26 are fundamentally connected to the NCSE's overall strategy. It highlights four priority areas linked to overall strategic objectives:

- ▶ how to support leadership and define NCSE culture
- ▶ enhance people experience
- ▶ how to support and develop staff
- ▶ how to strive to have a diverse, inclusive and supportive work environment within the NCSE.

These areas are summarised below.

Leadership and Culture

The NCSE is increasing its focus on developing leaders, with particular emphasis on developing those who prioritise inclusivity and diversity, foster a culture of openness, collaboration and respect. Leaders will ensure that all voices are heard and valued and create an environment where difference is celebrated and leveraged for innovation and growth. By promoting a culture of inclusivity, NCSE leaders can help attract and retain diverse talent, enhance employee engagement and drive organisational performance.

Support and Development

Support and development initiatives will contribute to a culture of continuous learning, adaptability and innovation. The NCSE wants to encourage employees to stay up to date with sectoral developments, expand their skillsets and contribute fresh ideas and perspectives to the organisation. This will help foster a growth mindset and enhance internal creativity.

People Experience

The people experience involves the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of work and strives to create an environment where employees feel valued, supported and empowered. A positive people experience creates a sense of belonging, purpose and fulfilment, leading to higher levels of employee engagement, productivity and loyalty – all of which the NCSE aims to achieve for its colleagues. This will also include opportunities to access family friendly work practices for all grades in the organisation.

In 2024, the facilities unit made key contributions to the people experience by:

- ▶ Procuring three new office sites in Wicklow, Monaghan and Leitrim.
- ▶ Reconfiguring and upgrading offices in Galway, Drogheda, Blanchardstown, Donegal, Mahon, Mullingar, Navan, Mallow, Ennis, Letterkenny, Roscommon and Wexford.
- ▶ Relocating staff to larger premises in Fermoy, Co Cork.
- ▶ Identifying offices as outgrown/unsuitable for business needs and prioritizing submissions to the OPW to source alternative spaces.
- ▶ Identifying the site for the new therapy hub in Co Limerick.

Inclusion and Community

This refers to creating an environment in which each individual feels valued, respected and empowered to contribute their unique skills and perspectives. It involves embracing diversity in all its forms including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability and cultural background. By promoting inclusivity, the NCSE can harness the power of various identities to drive innovation, creativity and collaboration.

In 2024, implementation of year one of the People Plan enabled the NCSE to make significant strides in fostering a culture that promotes continuous development, inclusion and collaboration.

That same year, the NCSE developed an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) framework setting out its commitment to the principles and promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion. The framework is an initial step to developing an EDI policy and a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. To drive this initiative, a working group was set up to refine and expand understanding of EDI within the NCSE via active staff engagement.

In 2024, as part of the People Plan, a scoping exercise was completed with frontline service providers – SENOs, team managers and administrators, who were on the main call line – to understand the causes of poor wellbeing. Work groups and feedback sessions resulted in bespoke wellbeing strategies and supports being put in place to support frontline staff. The NCSE agreed a three-pronged approach, initially aimed at the SENo and team manager grades to be followed by specific training for team managers and concluding with setting up reflective groups for those staff.

Strategic Goal 4:

Organisation Support and Development

Strategic Goal 4 – Organisation Support and Development

Develop a corporate identity grounded in the principles of operational excellence, responsiveness and innovation with best practice in governance.

The NCSE sets out four objectives and 12 related actions under Strategic Goal 4, Organisation Support and Development, in its Statement of Strategy 2023-26.

Goal 4 – Objectives and Actions

Objectives	Actions
1. Develop and embed a Total Quality Management system to ensure coherent and coordinated delivery of organisational services.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement TQM processes and systems across pillars with associated behaviour-related indicators. 2. Review outcome of systems and implement change as necessary.
2. Create and implement an NCSE communication and branding strategy to develop and embed a unified corporate identity of service with stakeholders.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Define, design and implement a communication and branding strategy and systems and communicate to stakeholders and staff. 2. Respond to media and parliamentary queries. 3. Align staff of all pillars to agreed internal communication principles and practices.
3. Develop an ICT and data management strategy to inform effective planning and reporting requirements for NCSE needs and those of external stakeholders.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Initiate a dedicated ICT strategy and work plan on an annual basis which centres on projects that support accessibility, reporting and information management. 2. Develop and implement an organisational data management strategy. 3. Develop and implement a standardised and electronic records management system.

Objectives	Actions
4. Ensure compliance with governance, administrative, financial and legal legislation, and guidance to optimise efficiencies and continue to meet all statutory requirements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure implementation of and compliance with the performance delivery agreement actions and oversee timely reporting on business goals as per the statement of strategy and work plans. 2. Review and ensure compliance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and other key governance, administrative, financial and legal legislation, and guidance to ensure NCSE upholds all statutory requirements. 3. Provide ongoing support to the operations of the Council. 4. Provide relevant legal support and information in consultation with external bodies.

4.1 Introduction

Throughout 2024, the NCSE continued to develop its organisation to ensure it was operating effectively to deliver services and in compliance with all statutory, regulatory and governance requirements. This section outlines activities in these areas across the year.

4.2 Total Quality Management – Operational Excellence

Objective – Develop and embed a Total Quality Management System (TQM) to ensure coherent and coordinated delivery of organisational services.

In 2023, the NCSE identified Total Quality Management (TQM) as a vehicle to promote operational excellence, underpinning a cycle of continuous improvement and delivery of quality frontline services. Planning and preparations were put in place at year end to begin work in this area, complementing ongoing work on organisational transformation under Vision 26.

In 2024, green and yellow belt training on Lean processes and principles, encompassing TQM standards, was rolled out across the management structure. Trainees formed a TQM taskforce to oversee organisation-wide projects, applying the learnings and ethos of Lean improvements and adherence to TQM principles on these projects and operating to promote organisational excellence.

A further roll-out of green belt training takes place in 2025, accredited by Cardiff University, Wales. Having a larger pool of experts to rotate membership within this group will make it more agile, thereby giving the NCSE the benefit of a wider range of voices and expertise.

4.3 NCSE Communications

Objective – Create and implement an NCSE communication and branding strategy to develop and embed a unified corporate identity of service with stakeholders.

4.3.1 Communication and Branding Strategy

In 2024, the change, communication and engagement team adopted the new Government branding and NCSE logo across all internal communication channels, including the quarterly bulletin, internal communications policy document, reports, presentations and internal/external correspondence.

4.3.2 External Communications

The external communications team has begun to fulfil NCSE communication goals outlined in the Statement of Strategy 2023-26. This strategy focuses on amplifying NCSE's presence to bolster its organisational reputation with external stakeholders, streamlining workflows, embracing paperless communications and optimising data use. Recent developments include expanding NCSE's social media presence, actively managing the Latest News section of its website and circulating a quarterly external newsletter to stakeholders.

As the NCSE expands, this team will ensure it continues to meet expectations in managing parliamentary questions, public representations, press queries and media responses. These efforts align with the organisation's commitment to governance standards and adoption of new Government branding, working collaboratively with internal teams to foster a unified corporate identity.

This will form part of the wider NCSE external communications strategy that began in late 2024 for publication in 2025.

4.3.3 Parliamentary Questions and Representations

As a State body, the NCSE provides information to members of the Oireachtas and maintains standards and principles in processing requests. Parliamentary questions (PQs) and representations (Reps.) are referred for direct reply to the Oireachtas member in accordance with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform circular 25/2016. In 2024, 127 PQs and 75 Reps were processed.

4.3.4 Internal Communications

In October 2024 the new and improved NCSE intranet launched as a platform for communication and knowledge sharing for the whole organisation. Its main objective is to enhance communication, share information and facilitate collaboration and consistency.

Since its launch, a suite of other tools has been introduced such as:

- ▶ A new starter pack – a central location for essential information required for new staff in their first weeks.

- ▶ Easily accessed links to SENO contact information.
- ▶ A dedicated folder for NCSE policies.
- ▶ Specific folders holding information and presentations slides from the staff conference and TQM projects.

The intranet carousel is regularly updated with useful organisational information and stories such as the new Parents Notify update, the Reduce Your Use campaign, the staff conference, ongoing recruitment competitions, wellbeing articles such as HSE Wellbeing podcasts and light-hearted content with the Just For Fun and seasonal sections.

The internal communications team monitors and reports on click rate statistics that measure engagement with various teams, targets content and adjusts to audiences based on areas of high interest.

In 2024 the new internal quarterly bulletin was launched; four editions issued in April, June, September and December. The team developed its look and content having researched and procured new software, Canva, to create and design articles and features in line with NCSE branding.

The bulletin, key to the communications strategy, has enhanced staff engagement and collaboration. It has encouraged participation and involvement in organisational activities by introducing target features such as the Day in the Life series that showcases success stories and spotlights staff contributions, HR updates and TQM project highlights. These additions have helped foster a deeper understanding of the various roles across the organisation and provide a platform for leadership to communicate openly.

As part of NCSE's internal communication plan and as a measure of change and transformation, staff feedback mechanisms such as the revised Pulse Survey were re-introduced in 2024.

Examples of 2024 staff surveys are:

- ▶ An initial internal communications survey to gather information on preferred methods of communication.
- ▶ Staff surveys linked to the annual staff conference with a follow-up analysis report to guide future content and event planning.
- ▶ The Pulse Survey, utilised by SMT to measure employee satisfaction and engagement with the NCSE.

Survey responses were collated and summarised into a report, published by the change, communications and engagement team, for SMT analysis and review and to track progress from 2023.

The report gives valuable insight and real-time data to help identify areas for improvement, measure employee morale and make data-driven decisions to enhance the overall employee experience.

Figure 28: Pulse Survey Analysis Report (2024)



4.4 ICT and Data Management

Objective – Develop an ICT and data management strategy to inform effective planning and reporting requirements for NCSE needs and external stakeholders.

4.4.1 ICT Strategy and Work Plan

In 2024, work was initiated to support the data strategy and objectives. There has been close working across all areas to identify actions and projects to support its goals. To this end, several projects have been progressed to support accessibility, with an emphasis on services delivered to the public. These accessibility features are also included in new website specifications.

The NCSE has engaged with the office of the Government's chief information officer and analysing market developments with a solution in mind to support an ongoing ICT strategy and to transform and future-proof NCSE in digital developments, encompassing a data management strategy and a records management system. Other developments achieved in 2024 include:

- ▶ Data maturity assessment – a thorough assessment of all NCSE-held data was conducted with stakeholders across the whole organisation with a view to assessing its maturity, security and type.
- ▶ Data inventory – created as a result of the data assessment.
- ▶ Systems review – undertaken as part of the data assessment.

- ▶ Data quality review pilot – an initial, high-level assessment of NCSE data quality to learn from the process and establish more widespread data practices in future.
- ▶ The open data portal was developed to near completion in 2024.

4.4.2 Development of New NCSE Data Strategy

In October 2023, a new project began to develop an NCSE data strategy. Its overall aim was to ensure both organisation and staff were well equipped to manage, appropriately and efficiently, organisational data activity. Support was procured from specialist external consultants and a steering group set up consisting of senior staff. Several phases of work took place including a data inventory and maturity assessment in the first quarter of 2024. Key changes in strategic data management will be rolled out during 2025.

This strategy has a clear set of actions to bring a coherent focus to efforts to improve the NCSE's capacity to manage and appropriately use the data it processes.

Overall aims include:

- ▶ Delivering efficient and effective student-focused practices that best serve students, their parents and schools.
- ▶ Using systems design, creative thinking and an innovative culture to improve the quality of services delivered and maximise use of digital technology.
- ▶ Ensuring staff have the skills, knowledge, tools and equipment to deliver.
- ▶ Enhancing strategic planning capability.
- ▶ Monitoring overall performance, learning and improving, and committing to continuous quality improvement.

4.4.4 Website Redesign

The NCSE has a website that provides a high volume of information for teachers, schools and parents including resources and supports relevant to these different groups, information on special classes, research, policy and publications pertaining to the special education sector.

The redesign of the NCSE's website started in November 2023 after it was reviewed by the National Disability Authority (NDA). Several recommendations were set out including that the site should be accessible on all devices and meet website content accessibility guidelines (WCAG). This project involved mapping all content and cataloguing a range of user experiences before tendering for a new redesigned website, based on international best practice.

A project manager was sourced through an Office of Government Procurement (OGP) framework in late 2023 and by April 2024 had concluded a thorough appraisal of requirements to best serve site users. NCSE stakeholders, internal and external, were canvassed with a view to addressing all needs and expectations. The project manager

then laid out a wide-reaching set of specifications for a new, modern website, focusing on criteria such as best-practice, accessibility, information and content management, all of which put the user at the heart of NCSE services. Work on engaging resources to build the website to specification is ongoing.

4.5 Corporate Governance and Code of Practice

Objective – Ensure compliance with governance, administrative, financial and legal legislation, and guidance to optimise efficiencies and continue to meet all statutory requirements.

4.5.1 Introduction

The NCSE adopted the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in August 2016. All agencies must comply with its full requirements, including recent annexes, remuneration and gender balance, diversity and inclusion. Section 4.5.10 details the confirmations of NCSE compliance with the code.

4.5.2 Performance Management

The Statement of Strategy covers 2023-26. The NCSE's Council developed and approved an annual work plan for 2024 based on the strategy in December 2023 with progress reviewed quarterly, alongside associated risks. A risk register for 2024 was also agreed by Council and this underpins oversight of NCSE work.

The 2024 Performance Delivery Agreement was agreed with the Department of Education during the year and engagement with the Department continues on monitoring progress against implementation.

4.5.3 NCSE System of Internal Control (SIC)

The NCSE's Council is responsible for ensuring that an effective system of internal control is maintained and operated in accordance with Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016) and for reviewing annually the effectiveness of the internal controls, including financial, operational and compliance controls and risk management processes and procedures.

The system of internal control, which accords with guidance issued by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, is in place in NCSE for the year ended 31 December 2024. Confirmation of the annual review of effectiveness of the NCSE Statement of Internal Control in 2024 is provided in the organisation's audited accounts, published separately.

4.5.4 Financial Governance and Compliance

Annual Accounts

The NCSE's annual accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General and, following audit, are submitted to the Minister and then laid before the Oireachtas and published on NCSE's website. The annual accounts are presented and published separately from this report. The 2023 accounts were published on the website in 2024.

The 2024 annual accounts are expected to be presented to the Minister in 2025 pending the audit's completion.

Audit

The NCSE has established an internal audit function and agreed an internal audit charter. Council has appointed an audit and risk committee (ARC) with agreed terms of reference including oversight of the internal audit function, risk management and review of the draft annual accounts.

Tax and Regulatory Compliance

There have been no communications concerning non-compliance with requirements of regulatory or tax authorities on any matter. The NCSE is not aware of any actual or possible non-compliance with laws or regulations that could affect its financial statements.

4.5.5 Data Protection

The NCSE processed ten data subject access requests in 2024, in compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the organisation's Data Protection Statement at [NCSE.ie](http://www.ncse.ie/ncse-data-protection)⁸. The NCSE data protection policy and data protection procedures are currently subject to ongoing internal audit with a data protection policy review due to be finalised in 2025.

One data breach has been reported to the Data Protection Commissioner in 2024. Forty-two low-risk data incidents for 2024 were reported to NCSE's data protection officer. Most related to two issues: inadvertent emailing data to an unintended recipient or inadvertently adding the incorrect attachment. In all cases, mitigating steps were taken and the risk level was deemed low to minimal. Data protection is a now a prominent feature of NCSE's induction programme and was addressed as part of a staff training session during the 2024 staff conference.

4.5.6 Climate Action Mandate

The NCSE remains committed to the Green agenda as set out in the 2023 climate action mandate. It continues to assess how best to use the tools at its disposal to further enhance compliance.

⁸ <http://www.ncse.ie/ncse-data-protection>

The 2024 summary of compliance is set out below.

NCSE Targets

As per the key indicators report, the NCSE is on track both to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51 per cent and improve energy efficiency by 50 per cent by 2030. It has achieved these metrics and looks to exceed them through careful planning, using data to inform decisions and making best use of available resources as per NCSE's climate action roadmap. The organisation continues to gather and assess data revising how best to implement changes needed to achieve targets set.

NCSE People

The NCSE has established a Green team to ensure the Green agenda remains at the forefront of decision-making consciousness. The principal actors have the seniority needed to effect budgetary, personnel and business decisions in such a way that the organisation proactively chases SEAI targets. The Green champion is NCSE's head of people support, development and transformation and EPO is head of the facilities team.

The NCSE operates 35 sites nationally in which it is not the principal tenant. The organisation is endeavouring to place a staff member on various managing boards across these sites so that its voice can be better heard.

Staff have identified Green training most suited to NCSE's unique organisational needs and are in the process of building a training schedule for Green team members.

The NCSE has succeeded in ensuring staff engagement and encouraging them to adapt their behaviour to ensure good sustainability practices are adopted and observed. This has been achieved using a myriad tools, notably emails, quarterly staff bulletin and signage throughout the buildings, shutting the offices over Christmas and communicating energy savings made during that period to staff, underlying the very real differences their actions have on our energy use.

NCSE Way of Working

The NCSE continues to confirm its sustained commitment to decarbonisation and energy efficiency in line with the targets set out in the Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act, 2021. This is evidenced by the NCSE's clear, concise, easy-to-follow reporting and analysis in its most recent annual report of its greenhouse gas emissions, its progress on the mandate's implementation as well as the sustainable activities undertaken to date. The NCSE continues to comply with the requirements set out in the 1/2020 circular.

Paper-based usage has been reviewed and a move to digitalisation has been evaluated. Digitalisation has become the default approach for a large proportion of the organisation, with a fit-for-purpose digital system having been procured and training sessions planned for regular intervals.

Recycled paper is the NCSE's paper of choice and ordered for head office as the default option. Any team looking for unrecycled paper needs to request this as a standalone ticket on the helpdesk flagging this. Staff are encouraged to order recycled where possible and are reminded of this with a prominently placed pop-up on the form itself.

The NCSE, being neither classed as a large public body, nor having an energy spend greater than €2 million, works within SEAI guidelines on the continued development and implementation of energy management programmes. It has implemented a large range of measures that include but are not limited to:

- ▶ Replacing lighting with LED bulbs.
- ▶ Procuring software to enable successful hot-desking.
- ▶ Relocating staff so that their base is aligned to their casework region thus reducing travel and emissions.
- ▶ Removal of easy access of plug-in heaters with the heating system being controlled locally by a limited number of staff and signage throughout the building encouraging staff to heat the person not the room.

When procuring goods, services or works for which national Green Public Procurement criteria were available, the NCSE included these in published tender documentation for individual contracts using public funds that were valued above the applicable EU procurement thresholds. The NCSE has gone further by including Green procurement criteria, where practical, in all its procurements regardless of contract value.

The NCSE no longer uses disposable cups, plates and cutlery in any of its facilities and did not procure or support any construction projects in 2024.

NCSE Buildings and Vehicles

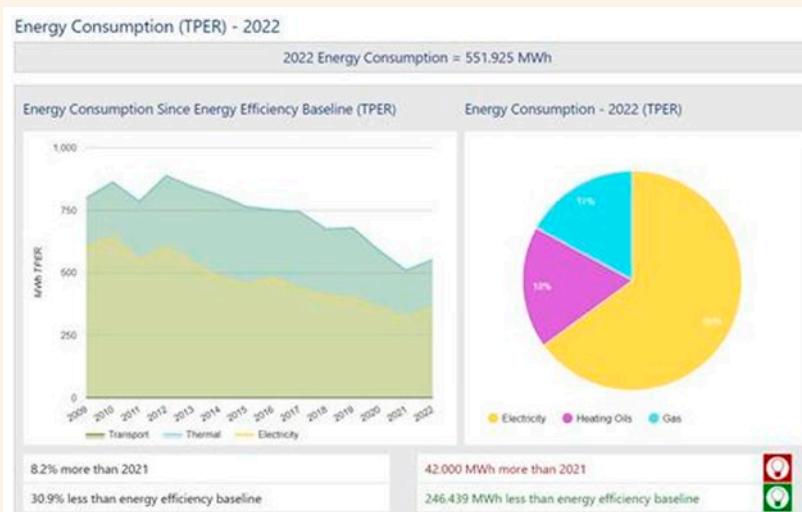
Shared mobility options are encouraged and supported where appropriate. The NCSE is in the early stages of working towards the smarter travel mark. The expression of interest has been submitted to the NTA. Staff have attended the information webinar on the smarter travel mark and are collating data needed to submit the application form. In the interim the NCSE is looking into how best to implement measures suitable for an organisation with its specific needs, focusing on those with the largest impact first. The NCSE has proportionally reduced car parking space available to staff, invested in software to allow staff to better share those spaces, encouraged car-pooling and is re-examining the feasibility/likely uptake in bike rack use.

Total Final Consumption – As Reported in 2024

Energy Type Units	2022	2021
Electricity MWh	359	317
Thermal MWh	193	193
Total MWh	552	510

Increase of 8.2 per cent reported for 2023, indicative of NCSE organisational and team expansion.

Figure 29: NCSE Energy Consumption 2022-24

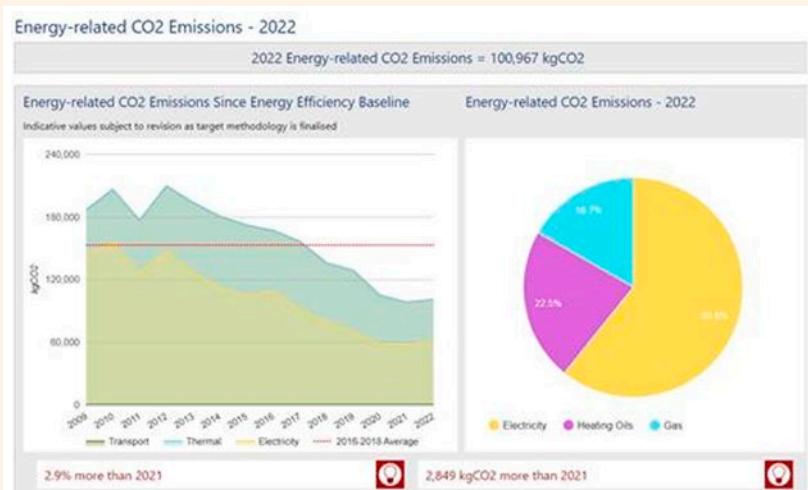


Energy-related CO₂ Emissions – As Reported 2024

Units	2022	2021
kgCO ₂	100,967	98,118

Increase of 2.9% reported for 2023, indicative of NCSE organisational and team expansion.

Figure 30: NCSE Energy-Related CO₂ Emissions (2022)



The NCSE has a comprehensive plan to ensure the building stock is appropriate for the organisation's scale. It ensures that the spaces it services are used to their full capacity by forecasting staff as well as their projected locations. Building stock is managed accordingly with rooms relinquished where possible. An acquired software application to ensure that hot-desking is optimised and well managed, new smaller desks have been purchased so that more can be utilised within a certain space when reconfiguring offices for additional staff.

4.5.7 NCSE Procurement

NCSE Procurement Policy

Government policy on public procurement is being applied in the NCSE together with adherence to public spending code rules and procedures. Updates are incorporated in respect of relevant legislation and circulars – including circular 05/2023 and e-forms used in e-tenders, as set out under new Regulation (EU) 2019/1780, subsequently amended with (EU) 2022/2303. In 2024, the NCSE continued internal monitoring of procurement along with a review and enhanced oversight of procedures; furthermore, updated guidance was provided at induction and training for staff in procurement roles.

The NCSE avails of shared service arrangements and central drawdown contracts, including where possible those established by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) and the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

The organisation's corporate procurement plan was updated in 2024.

Green Procurement

Green Public Procurement (GPP) is a process where public bodies seek to source goods, services or works with a reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle. The NCSE has a responsibility to promote and implement Green procurement processes in relevant procurement of goods and services and where possible follows the

guidance published by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in September 2021 and incorporates the Office of Government Procurement GPP criteria search, an online tool identifying relevant criteria for inclusion in procurement specifications.

In 2024, the NCSE incorporated Green procurement criteria into seven procurement processes for goods and services over €25,000. These activities related to IT consumables, software development, software licences and professional services.

4.5.8 NCSE Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures

The NCSE has developed staff procedures and guidelines on child protection and welfare matters as part of the requirements enacted in 2017 under the Children First Act, 2015. NCSE guidelines are available at www.ncse.ie⁹.

The NCSE Child Safeguarding Statement and procedures were updated in 2024. Any matters drawn to NCSE's attention in 2024 were processed in accordance with its own procedures.

4.5.9 Protected Disclosures

The NCSE drafted a revised policy and procedures for dealing with protected disclosures in line with the Protected Disclosures Act, 2014, as amended by the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act, 2022. The revised policy was published in Q2, 2024.

No issues were raised under this policy in 2024.

4.5.10 Compliance with other items under the Code of Practice

Government Pay Guidelines – NCSE staff

Salaries payable to the chief executive officer and all employees comply with Government policy.

Disposal of Assets

Disposal of assets by the NCSE fully complies with requirements set down by the Code of Practice.

Regulation of Lobbying Act, 2015

The NCSE's chief executive is a designated public official under this Act.

NCSE Travel Policy

Government policy on business travel is being complied with in all respects. The NCSE has developed and maintains its travel policy and procedures in accordance with Government requirements.

9 www.ncse.ie

4.6 The Council of the NCSE

Objective – Ensure compliance with governance, administrative, financial and legal legislation, and guidance to optimise efficiencies and continue to meet all statutory requirements.



Members of the NCSE Council: Back row (L-R): Caroline Quinn, Eamon Clavin, Diarmuid Dullaghan, Peter Archer, Dharragh Hunt, Angela O'Neill. Front row (L-R): Pat Goff, Yvonne Kennedy, Fergal Lynch, Deirbhile NicCraith, Michael Redmond, Eileen Daly. Inset: Catherine Crowe

The organisation's governance authority is the Council of the National Council for Special Education. It is appointed by the Minister for Education under Section 21 of the EPSEN Act, 2004. The Council, whose functions are set out in section 20 of the Act, is accountable to the Minister for Education and responsible for ensuring good governance. Council work and responsibilities are set out in the EPSEN Act and the NCSE Corporate Governance Guide for Council Members, which specifically sets out matters reserved for the body. Its business and duties are further outlined in the Council terms of reference and standing orders.

Standing items considered by Council include:

- ▶ declaration of interests
- ▶ reports from committees
- ▶ financial reports/management accounts
- ▶ performance report
- ▶ reserved matters, and
- ▶ review of risks associated with NCSE.

This Council's term of office began 1 January 2023 and runs for four years to 2026. Seven members from the previous iteration were reappointed for a second term. The chair and remaining ordinary members were appointed in 2023.

The Council is responsible for preparing the annual plan and financial statements. Confirmation that the latter provide a true and fair view of the NCSE's financial performance and position in 2024 is provided in audited annual accounts published separately.

As required under the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, the Council reviewed its annual performance and that of its committees during the year.

The Council met seven times in 2024. Table 15 contains details of individual members and their attendance.

Table 15: Membership of the Council of the NCSE in 2024

Name	Details	Attendance ¹⁰
Dr Fergal Lynch, chairperson	Senior lead in Government and public policy engagement, University of Galway	7
Pat Goff*, deputy chairperson	Former president and deputy chief executive officer, Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN)	7
Dr Peter Archer*	Former chief executive officer, Educational Research Centre	7
Eamon Clavin*	Former divisional inspector in the Department of Education (DE)	7
Catherine Cross	Services manager, National Parents Council	4
Eileen Daly*	Further and higher education disability officer and career guidance practitioner	6
Diarmuid Dullaghan	Divisional inspector, Inspectorate, Department of Education	6
Dharragh Hunt*	Senior policy and public affairs adviser, National Disability Authority	6
Dr Yvonne Kennedy	Regional director, National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS)	6
Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith*	Former assistant general secretary and director of education and research with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and adjunct professor in the School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, DCU Institute of Education.	7
Angela O'Neill*	National disability specialist, HSE community operations team	7

10

Name	Details	Attendance ¹⁰
Caroline Quinn	Retired principal, Our Lady of Good Counsel GNS, Johnstown, Killiney, and member of IPPN National Council	6
Dr Michael Redmond	Assistant general secretary for research, development, and training, Joint Managerial Body (JMB)	7

Those members whose names are denoted with an asterisk * are serving a second consecutive term on Council.

4.6.1 Council Committees

The five committees appointed by Council under Section 33 of the EPSEN Act, 2004, are:

- ▶ Audit and Risk (ARC)
- ▶ Finance
- ▶ Chief Executive Performance
- ▶ Research
- ▶ Strategy and Policy.

Each team reports in accordance with its terms of reference and governance guidelines as determined by the Council. Members serve on one or more. In the case of audit and risk, Council has appointed an external chairperson with relevant experience.

ARC comprises three Council members and includes an external chair. Its role is to support the NCSE Council in its responsibilities for issues of risk, control and governance by reviewing the comprehensiveness of assurances in meeting the Council's assurance needs and reviewing the reliability and integrity of these assurances. ARC is independent in the performance of its functions and responsibilities and in the determination and monitoring of its work programme. It is not subject to direction or control from any other party which could impair the carrying out of its functions. It meets at least four times a year and minutes are circulated to all members of Council. The committee reports to the Council after each committee meeting. Committee members are Lisa Campbell (Chair), Peter Archer, Pat Goff and Deirbhile Nic Craith. It met five times in 2024.

Audit and Risk (five meetings)	Attendance
Lisa Campbell, chairperson	5
Deirbhile Nic Craith	5
Peter Archer	5
Pat Goff	5

The chief executive performance committee's role is to review the chief executive's performance vis a vis the organisational business plan. It meets at least twice each year and in 2024 convened twice. Membership and attendance are set out below.

Chief Executive Performance (two meetings)	Attendance
Fergal Lynch, chairperson	2
Peter Archer	2
Pat Goff	2

The finance committee has four Council members. Its role, to update and advise the Council on its financial position, is advisory along with reporting and making recommendations in order to support Council's financial decision-making. It met six times in 2024. Attendance and membership are set out below.

Finance (six meetings)	Attendance
Deirbhile Nic Craith, chairperson	6
Caroline Quinn	3
Eileen Daly	3
Diarmuid Dullaghan	5

The research committee has four Council members. It advises Council on the research policy and programme and makes appropriate expert inputs into the strategic development of the Council's research policy including its multi-annual research programme. It met three times in 2024.

Research (three meetings)	Attendance
Peter Archer, chairperson	3
Dharragh Hunt	3
Catherine Cross	3
Yvonne Kennedy	1

The strategy and policy committee has four Council members. Its role is to make appropriate inputs into development of policy advice and ongoing NCSE strategic activities. It met twice in 2024.

Strategy and Policy (two meetings)	Attendance
Pat Goff, chairperson	2
Angela O'Neill	2
Michael Redmond	1
Eamon Clavin	2

4.6.2 Schedule of Reserved and Delegated Functions

The Council has agreed and reserved a formal schedule of specific matters for decision to ensure its appropriate direction and control of the NCSE. Council has also agreed a schedule of delegations to the chief executive.

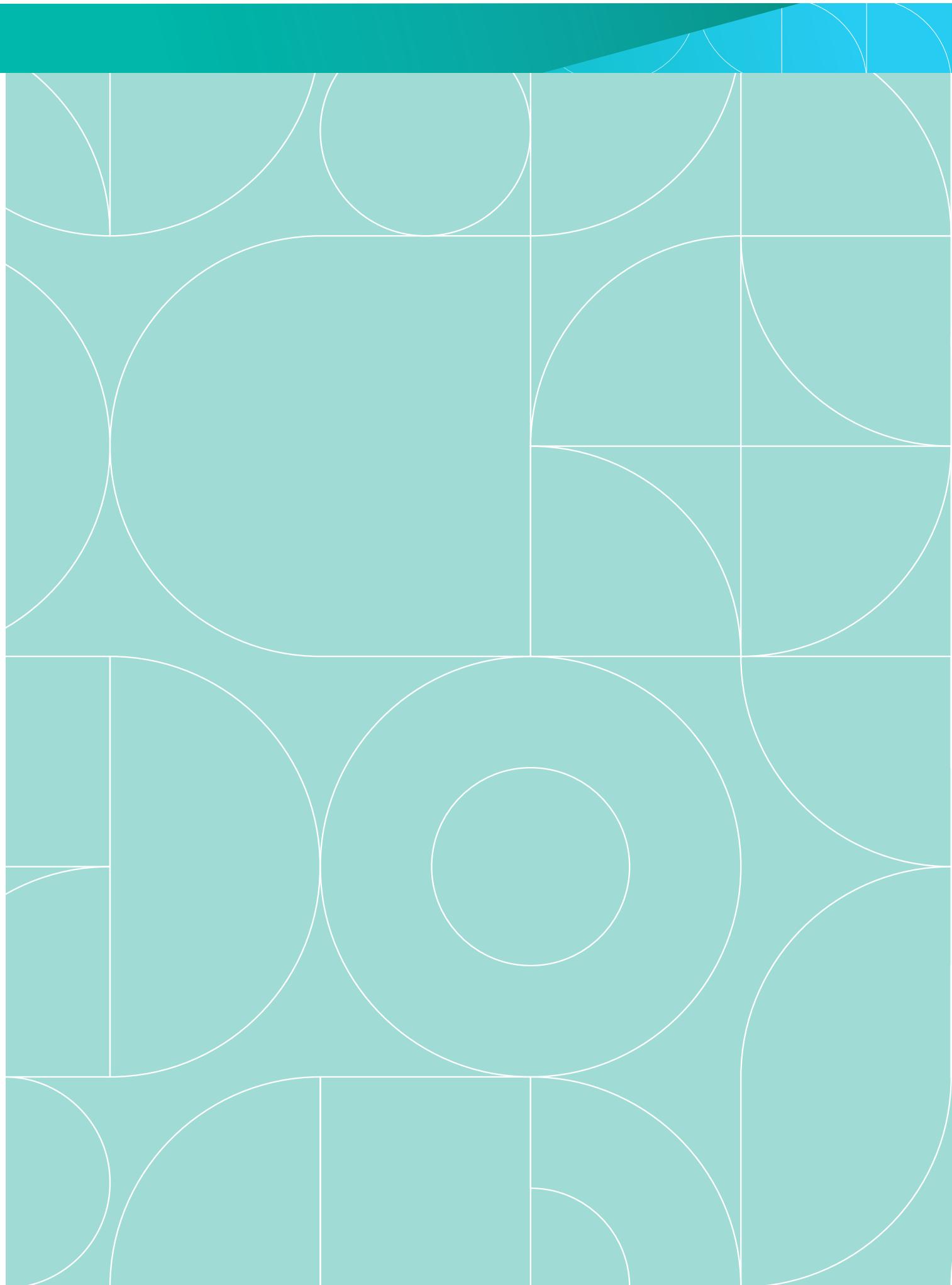
These schedules were updated in February 2024; more detail is available in the Corporate Governance Guide Appendices for Council members available on the NCSE website.

4.6.3 Gender Balance of Council

In 2024, six of the NCSE Council's 12 ordinary members were female. This is in accordance with the 40 per cent gender balance requirement, as set out in the new annex on gender balance, diversity and inclusion (2020), supplementary to the existing Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016).

4.6.4 Government Pay Guidelines – NCSE Council and Staff

The salaries payable to the chief executive officer and all employees comply with Government policy. No directors' fees are payable to NCSE Council members. Individual Council members' expenses are detailed in the financial statement for 2024, published separately to this Annual Report.



Appendices

Appendix 1 – NCSE Staffing

Grade	Staff in Post End 2024
Civil Servants	
Chief executive	1
Principal	5
National coordinators	2
National development lead	4
Specialist lead	12
Assistant principal	10
Educational technologist	1
Team managers	21
Behaviour practitioners	4
Occupational therapists	3
Speech and language therapists	7
Therapist manager	2
Special educational needs organisers (SENO)	121
Higher executive officers	17
ISL tutors	5
Administrative officer	1
Executive officers	25
Clerical officers (incl TCOs)	40
Services officer	1
Sub-total (civil servants)	282
Advisers	78
Visiting teachers	50

Appendix 2 – Statistical Information on Allocations and Special Classes for School Years 2013-14 to 2023-24

Statistical Information for 2013-14 to 2023-24

Tables A2.1-4 provide the trend data for school years 2013-14 to 2023-24, in respect of NCSE resource allocation activity.

- ▶ Data on special school enrolments have been provided by the Department of Education primary online database (POD).
- ▶ Data on SET allocations have been provided by Special Education Section, Department of Education.
- ▶ All other data are provided by the NCSE special education administrative system (SEAS).

Table A2.1: Applications received from schools for access to additional resources

Type of Applications	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24
Transport	2,787	3,289	3,423	3,460	3,597	3,847	4,302	4,366 ¹¹	5,417	5,991	6,002
Assistive Technology	2,882	2,928	3,564	4,686	4,157	4,453	5,510	5,481	6,572	7,341	8,606
Total Applications	5,669	6,217	6,987	8,146	7,754	8,300	9,812	9,847	11,989	13,332	14,608

Table A2.2: Special Education Resources Allocated to Schools by NCSE

Type of Posts	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24
SNA	10,671	11,174	11,984	13,006	14,063	15,030	16,125	17,117	18,113	19,481	21,002
Special Education Teaching	–	–	–	–	13,395	13,436	13,529	13,620	13,765	14,396	15,142
Special School-teachers	1,060	1,135	1,159	11,979	1,205	1,223	1,231	1,240	1,282	1,340	1,392
Special Class Teachers	823	956	1,136	1,304	1,480	1,663	1,865	2,103	2,456	2,919	3,360

¹¹ A small number of applications for school transport for the 2020-21 school year was recorded for the 2019-20 school year. Therefore, the applications for transport are to a small extent over-reported in 2019-20 and under-reported in 2020-21. This also applies to data reported for the 2019-20 school year in the NCSE Annual Report for 2020.

Table A2.3: Numbers of Students Supported in Special Class and Special School Placements

Students	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24
Special Classes	4,353	4,706	5,472	6,393	7,390	8,410	9,259	10,436	12,289	14,352	16,548
Special School ¹²	7,240	7,283	7,468	7,561	7,656	7,722	7,856	7,900	8,158	8,424	8,784

Table A2.4: Primary Special Classes by Type

Class Type	Number of Special Classes by Year					
	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Autism Early Intervention	71	135	133	151	157	158
Autism	482	1,000	1,217	1,463	1,698	1,988
Emotional/Behavioural Disorders	4	7	6	5	5	5
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	9	13	14	17	16	16
HI Early Intervention	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mild General Learning Disability	35	39	39	37	37	36
Moderate General Learning Disability	11	23	25	24	28	29
Multiple Disabilities	13	19	23	24	20	21
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	7	9	9	8	8	8
Specific Learning Needs	13	13	13	13	14	14
Developmental Language Disorder ¹³	59	63	64	64	64	63
Total	705	1,322	1,544	1,807	2,048	2,339

¹² The figures presented for special schools in Table A2.3 differ from earlier Annual Reports, with students for two schools resourced by the NCSE during 2012-13 to 2017-18 now included in the annual totals.

¹³ Developmental language disorder (DLD) was previously known as specific speech and language disorder (SSLD).

Table A2.5: Post-Primary Special Classes by Type

Post-Primary	Number of Special Classes by Year					
	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Class Type						
Autism	189	435	524	653	780	902
Emotional/Behavioural Disorders	2	3	3	3	3	3
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	5	5	5	7	8	8
Mild General Learning Disability	11	14	14	14	14	14
Moderate General Learning Disability	25	45	46	49	51	53
Multiple Disabilities	5	12	13	13	14	13
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	0	1	1	1	1	1
Other					1	1
Blind/Vision Impaired	0	2	2	2	1	2
Total	237	517	608	742	873	997

Appendix 3 – Glossary of Acronyms Used

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
AoN	Assessment of need
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy
CPD	Continuing professional development
DE	Department of Education
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EBD	Emotional disturbance/behavioural disorder
ELC	Early Learning Centre
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004
ERT	Enhanced regional teams
HSE	Health Service Executive
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
ISTP	In-school therapy support
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OT	Occupational therapist
PCF	Primary Curriculum Framework
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PMC	Primary Mathematics Curriculum
SENO	Special educational needs organiser
SER	SNA Exceptional Review
SET	Special education teacher
SIC	System of internal control
SIM	School Inclusion Model
SNA	Special needs assistant
SLT	Speech and language therapist
TPL	Teacher professional learning
VT	Visiting teacher

Appendix 4 – Statistical Information on Special Classes and Special Schools

Table A4.1: Number of Students in Specialist Settings

School Year	Special Classes	Special Schools*
2023-24	16,553	8,784
2022-23	14,352	8,424
2021-22	12,289	8,158
2020-21	10,436	7,900

* Data included for NCSE-Supported Special Schools

Table A4.2: Special Classes and Places Available

School Year	Classes	Places available
2023-24	2,921	18,082
2022-23	2,549	15,844
2021-22	2,152	13,464
2020-21	1,839	11,580

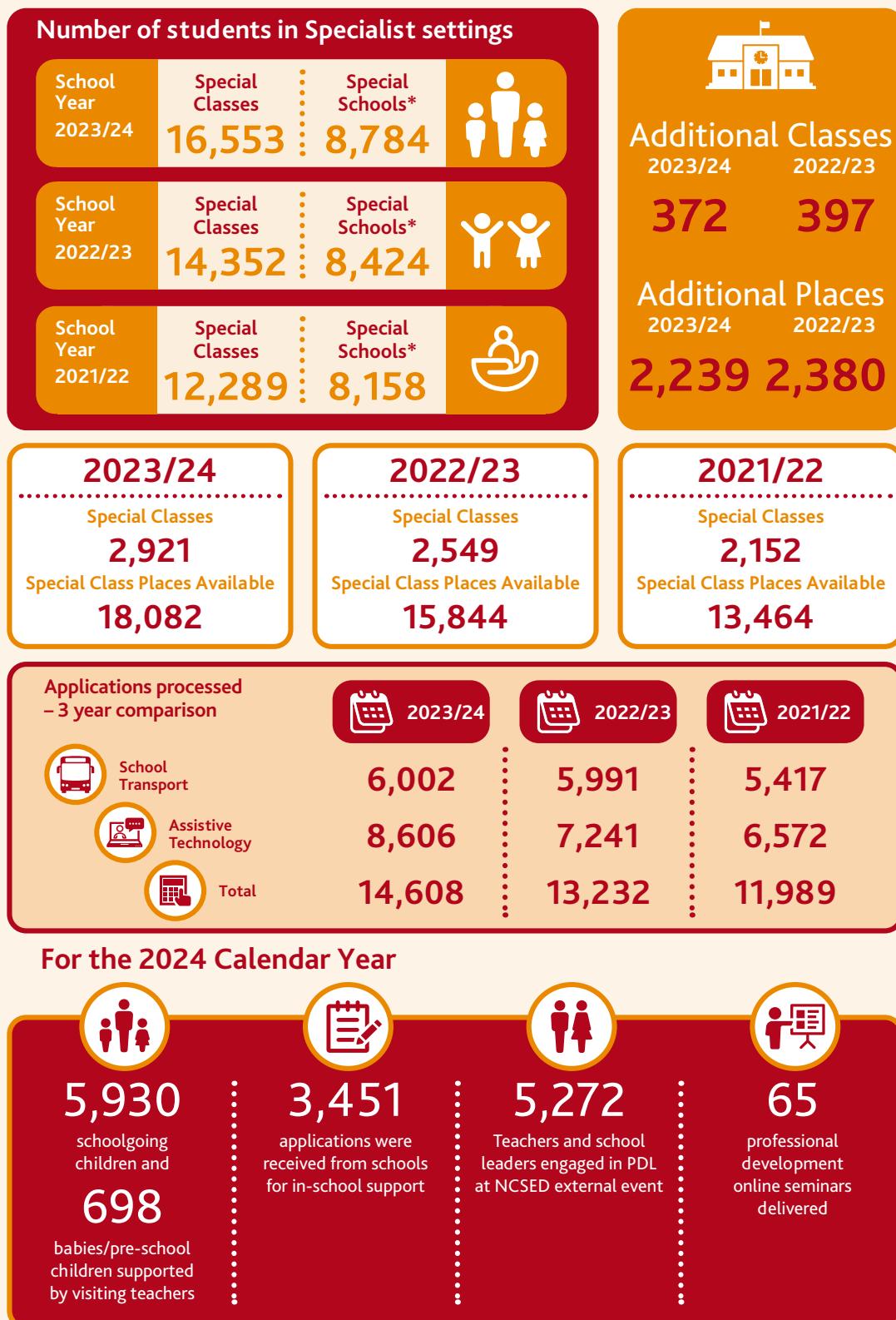
Table A4.3: Additional Classes and Places

School Year	Additional Classes	Additional Places
2023-24	372	2,239
2022-23	397	2,380
2021-22	313	1,884

Table A4.4: Applications Processed – Three-Year Comparison

Type	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
School Transport	4,366	5,417	5,991	6,002
Assistive Technology	5,481	6,572	7,241	8,606
Total	9,847	11,989	13,232	14,608

Appendix 5 – Infographic on Main NCSE Statistics



*Data included for NCSE supported Special Schools

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