

Submission on coordination of services and future working arrangements between the National Council for Special Education (Inclusion Support Service) and the National Education Psychological Service

The Education Partnership Group welcomes the establishment of the Inclusion Support Service (ISS) within the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The inclusion of the Visiting Teachers Service, the Special Education Support Service and the National Behaviour Support Service in the Inclusion Support Service is a positive development.

The coordination of all services is of critical importance for the welfare and development of children. The following steps are necessary to achieve effective coordination:

- 1) The NCSE should put in place an appropriate management and coordination structure within ISS to enable delivery of these services for their clients. Each service should have its own manager who should report to the manager of the ISS whose remit should include the coordination of the organisation's activities in terms of strategy, planning, organisation and delivery.
- 2) The National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) should also be included within the ISS structure to ensure that all knowledge and information is shared and that comprehensive plans for each child can be put in place and monitored. The NEPS service identifies the psychological, learning, behavioural and other needs of children and has an important role in enabling children participate in mainstream schools, as well as offering appropriate supports in specialist education settings. The work of NEPS is critical to the development of an Individual Education Plan for many children with special needs. NEPS therefore has a crucial role in achieving overall coordination of services and should be an integral part of the ISS's coordinated management structure, both nationally and regionally.

In the context of the development of ISS, the current management structure of NEPS would not be affected; the only change suggested is that the national manager of NEPS should be part of the ISS management team, should report directly to the ISS manager and, crucially, should be part of a coordinated strategy to identify and support the needs of children with disabilities in schools.

- 3) While coordination needs to happen nationally via the ISS manager, given that strategies, targets and outcomes should be set nationally, regional coordination structures are also essential. Individual cases must be reviewed and supported in a coordinated manner on a regional basis using a multi-disciplinary team approach.
- 4) The new ISS should not be seen as having an 'education only' brief. To ensure effective coordination of all services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, it is essential that the HSE is also included within the coordinated structure. Appropriate linkages should be put in place between ISS and the services funded by the HSE i.e. audiology, language development, medical implants, assistive technology, screening, speech and language services, home tuition services etc.

The coordination of services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children is critical and in our view represents *the* major service gap at present. For example, the value of the New Born Screening programme is reduced if the parents are not immediately introduced to the full range of possibilities for their child in terms of language acquisition, health, hearing, social development and educational development. This requires a coordinated multi-disciplinary team approach.

We wish to emphasise that the structural changes associated with the establishment of the ISS and the coordination of services will not, by themselves, ensure the provision of essential specialist services unless the required levels of competence and expertise are developed. The requirement for a specialist multi-disciplinary team for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students is **an absolute priority**, given the specialist training and expertise required to work in this field.

This point is especially relevant in relation to the work of the NEPS team. For example:

- a) Currently there is no expertise within NEPS in the assessment of the development of Irish Sign Language (ISL) for children for whom their first language is ISL, nor are tests adapted for sign language using test-takers, a critical issue in ensuring reliability of results. Equally as important, the professionals who currently assess Deaf children do not have the necessary proficiency in ISL to complete such tasks. Urgent action is now needed to implement an important recommendation of the NCSE Policy Advice Paper published in November 2011 which stated that:

‘The NEPS should work towards the provision of a psychological service with a sufficient level of competency in ISL to administer psychological assessment and to communicate with parents and children whose preferred mode of communication is through ISL.’

- b) Currently, no appropriate assessments are available through ISL for children who predominantly use ISL or for those who are developing bilingual English/ISL competence. These populations must be considered when developing, administering and evaluating the reliability of results. The current system is akin to assessing the cognitive/linguistic capacity of a German speaking child through the medium of Japanese. The issue of how Deaf and Hard of Hearing children should be assessed in educational psychology settings needs to be examined.
- c) The time currently allocated by the NEPS team for providing support in the special schools is inadequate, given the special needs of the children in our schools, and should be addressed as a matter of urgency."
- d) An issue that must also be addressed is the level of ISL-related linguistic support to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in classroom settings – mainstream or special school setting - where a teacher’s sign language proficiency is not sufficient for curriculum delivery. In certain circumstances, the provision of educational interpreting services will be an appropriate accommodation, and this must go hand in hand with ensuring that a child’s ISL competence is developing in tandem with the linguistic proficiency required to access the national curriculum.