

## Background

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Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) were first employed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, 2004. At that time, the number of SENOs was not at full strength, but Senior Management was committed to a programme of ongoing recruitment, with the aim of gradually increasing staff to the authorised levels of 86 SENOs and 12 Senior SENOs posts, a total of 98 (S)SENO posts.

(S)SENOs have an assigned district or caseload of schools to which they provide a service. The service provided to schools includes, but is not limited to, the processing of applications for supports for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). (S)SENOs also conduct regular reviews of students who have been sanctioned with Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support to establish whether there has been a change to care needs of the students that might merit a change to the overall allocation of support to the school. In addition, (S)SENOs liaise with school principals, resource teachers and other staff, providing information regarding best practice, advising on placement options and outlining Department of Education and Skills policy and criteria.

In addition, (S)SENOs are involved with: Home Tuition applications; delivering information sessions to parents; transition planning for students as they move schools; file management and archiving; engaging with adult training and education providers; provision of services to former ABA Special Schools; provision of training and support to schools engaged with the NCSE Inclusive Education Framework; participation in regular liaison meetings with NEPS, the school Psychology service; planning for children who are currently out of school; participation in the Section 29 appeals process for students who are refused or expelled from a school place; liaison with Túsla, the Child and Family Agency; engagement with HSE regarding the Progressing Disability Services initiative; planning for the placement of pre-school aged children with SEN, and participation in internal NCSE working groups. (S)SENOs are also an important point of contact for parents of students with SEN, providing information and support regarding school placement, as well as supporting parents when school is not going smoothly for their child. (S)SENOs are also called upon to provide reports when Parliamentary Questions / Ministerial Representations arise.

In addition to the duties outlined above, Senior SENOs (SSENOs) are also responsible for the management of a team of SENOs, and have overall responsibility for co-ordination of provision of service across their areas. To accommodate management duties, Senior SENOs schools caseloads are approximately half of those of SENOs.

SSENOs are involved in managing staff performance formally through the Performance Management Development System (PMDS), and informally through team meetings and individual consultation and coaching. SSENOs also provide support and guidance to SENOs when difficult cases arise. SSENOs form a conduit for the sharing of information between Head Office and Local Services, as well as co-ordinating team responses to requests for information from Head Office. SSENOs have an administrative role in personnel processes such as travel and subsistence claims, and annual / other leave requests. SSENOs attend regular SSENO and Senior Management meetings.

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## Effect of the Employment Control Framework (ECF)

(S)SENOS were initially exempted from the recruitment embargo across the civil service as we were considered “front line staff”. Consequently, NCSE were recruiting SENOs until December 2010. However, NCSE was then instructed to reduce staff numbers over the period 2011-2014 under the Employment Control Framework. During this period the numbers of (S)SENOS fell dramatically from the previously authorised number of 98 to 76 at the end of 2014. As staff left the organisation, their work was redistributed amongst remaining staff which caused an increase in workload of approximately 10-15% for all (S)SENOS. In addition, (S)SENOS are expected to provide cover when a colleague is on long term leave, which has meant a further increase in work of between 10 and 25% for individual (S)SENOS. Some counties were left without a SENO, and are now operating with a number of staff from diverse areas providing a minimal service. This flies in the face of the original premise for NCSE, in which SENOs were to provide a local service, with knowledge of schools, parents and agencies in their area.

These reductions in SENO (20.9%) and SSENOS (25%) numbers occurred against a backdrop of changes to the resource and SNA allocation process, expansion of the SENO role and most significantly, increased demand for services, due to increased numbers of applications from schools for students with disabilities and SEN. During the years between 2009 and 2015, the NCSE has witnessed an increase of 54% in applications for Low Incidence Teaching Hours (LITH), and 73% in applications for SNA support, (please enclosed table below for further details). The increasing number of children with Special Educational Needs requiring a service from (S)SENOS also brings with it an increase in the number of concerned parents with whom we interact.

As a result of the significant reduction in (S)SENOS and the huge increase in demand for the service that we provide, (S)SENOS have been struggling to provide an adequate and appropriate service to students with SEN, their parents and the schools. At times, due to the pressure of deadlines, and the requirement on NCSE to provide DES with information, (S)SENOS can find themselves under pressure to make decisions without the opportunity to give that decision proper consideration. This can leave (S)SENOS, and the NCSE, in a vulnerable position if the decision is questioned or appealed.

On the whole (S)SENOS are a very committed group of professionals who are working above and beyond in order to ensure that, as far as possible, our service users do not suffer. In 2010, and 2014, (S)SENOS were surveyed and asked did they ever work in excess of their contracted hours. Results indicated that, despite an increase in the hours worked per week in 2014 (as per the Haddington Road Agreement), significantly more staff were working in excess of their contracted hours in 2014 than had been the case in 2010. This is a clear reflection of the increasing demand for service as well as decreasing numbers of staff available to provide that service. (S)SENOS cannot be expected to continue to work in excess of their contracted hours of employment.

## Future

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It is clear that the current cohort of (S)SENOS cannot sustain the current level of demand for service. It is also apparent that the trend of increasing demand for service is likely to continue, due to increasing birth rate and predicted levels of SEN/Disability. According to the CSO, birth rate figures indicate that births have increased over the last number of years, in 2002 there were 60,503 births

and in 2012 this had increased to 72,225, or 19.5% more births in 2012 than in 2002. There has been a corresponding increase of 8.7% in children attending school since 2009, according to DES figures.

In 2009, NCSE had an authorised total of 98 (S)SENOS available. Currently there are 77 (S)SENOS in employment with NCSE. This is deficit of 21 staff, and we believe that this number of staff, at a minimum, is required, in order for NCSE to continue to fulfil its role and obligations as outlined in the EPSEN Act (2004). We suggest that these posts should consist of 3 SSENOS and 18 SENOS.

In addition, much of the work that (S)SENOS engage in on a day to day basis is administrative work, and could be completed more efficiently and at a lower cost to the NCSE were clerical support to be provided at a local level. It is our opinion that the current level of work involved in the expanded role of the SSENOS makes it impossible to continue to carry a caseload of schools. We believe that these schools should be removed from the SSENOS cohort and redistributed amongst the new and existing SENOS when recruitment to 2009 authorised levels has occurred.

The NCSE has proposed a new model for the allocation of LITH to schools for students with SEN, and it is envisaged that this might be introduced within the next year or two. While this new model would have an impact on (S)SENOS' day to day work at certain times of the year, it is not clear that the overall effect would be a significant reduction in work. It is likely that the new model of LITH allocation will make little or no difference to the SENOS workload, as the needs for, advice and support to parents and schools, SNA support for students in schools and for the development of new classes continues to rise.