



Frequently Asked Questions on the New Circular on the Role of the SNA

This document will be updated on a rolling basis.

This version is dated: Wednesday 3rd June.

1. How is the SNA Role described?

The role of SNA is described as follows:

To enable students with diverse needs to access the curriculum and participate fully in school life.

2. Does this circular change or expand the SNA role / what does this do for the SNA role?

No, the new circular does not expand the SNA role further than what is already in practice on the ground, it will however recognise the modern SNA role and take into consideration the significant changes that have occurred in practice since circular 30/2014.

3. Will the role title of Special Needs Assistant change?

No, whilst there were discussions in this regard, and it was acknowledged that some schools use titles such as 'inclusion support assistant' or 'additional needs assistant' for SNAs working at their schools. However, the Department has chosen to continue using the term 'special needs assistant' or 'SNA' to ensure consistency with existing policy and legislation and schools should conform to this.

4. Does this mean the SNA role is now considered a professional role?

Yes, the role of the SNA will now be recognised as a professional role, and a new minimum qualification requirement at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) will be introduced. To support this transition, a five-year implementation period has been agreed, allowing time for the new qualification requirement to be phased in before becoming the standard entry qualification for the role. There will be exemptions to this for those approaching retirement and a grandfather clause, for existing SNAs with experience.

5. Does this mean there will be greater numbers of SNAs allocated or will there be a change the allocation criteria?

SNAs are allocated to schools by the NCSE, using the criteria determined between the government and NCSE, and within an annual budgetary provision that is set out/allocated by the government in the budget. To allocate additional posts or loosen the criteria in a way that more needs can be met, would need to be a government decision and

would require a societal campaign directed at the government seeking additional funding for special education.

However, the new Circular recognises a wide range of areas where SNAs provide supports to students outside the narrow confines of core care needs (physical care needs); including emotional regulation, managing challenging behaviours and supports for learning and development. The NCSE will now have to take account of the contents of the new Circular when they decide on SNA allocations.

The NCSE has been asked by the Department to produce guidance for students, parents and schools on how they conduct an SNA Review and what criteria they use. That document, when produced, will focus the debate on allocations. Allocations are subject to the budgetary limits as set out in the budget annually.

Fórsa has secured agreement that when the NCSE SNA Reviews are implemented from September 2027, no more than 1 SNA post will be lost in any school year in the future. The Redeployment Scheme will be available if SNAs need that facility. This is explained in the Redeployment FAQ document.

6. Does this alter how SNAs can be deployed or assigned by the principal?

No, given the issues and delays in obtaining assessments of need (AON) through the public system and the fact that many cannot afford to get children assessed privately, this means that SNAs are no longer assigned exclusively to children who have an AON.

SNAs can be assigned to students by the principal but should be assigned to those whose needs are greatest and who have needs identified, within the NCSE Continuum of Care guidance. The NCSE will remain responsible for the assignment of SNA posts to schools.

The allocations (as per answer above) will be made using criteria agreed between the NCSE and the Department/Government and within the budgetary provision set out by Government in the previous year's budget.

Campaigns to change these criteria, or increase the budgetary provisions allocated are societal campaigns, not Industrial Relations issues and as such, do not fall within the scope of these discussions.

It is expected that the NCSE will release a document detailing the methodology they use in making their assessments and will outline how they conclude what support is required.

7. How did the Department come to their views or conclusions, what engagement was held?

The Department took an evidence-based approach to the new plan, combined with significant consultation/engagement with all stakeholders. There were 55 working group meetings held over 24 months alongside working groups with school leaders, teaching colleagues, children and SNAs themselves.

Much of the content of the plan came from these engagements and the suggestions made by SNAs in the focus groups. They also considered responses from SNAs who took part in the national SNA survey, as included in the detailed reports on those engagements, which is available on the SNA Hub.

8. Is there a change in the reporting relationship with the principal or in how the SNA interacts with the teacher?

No, there is no change to the reporting relationship with the principal. However, SNAs should now feature more integrally within the school structure, when it comes to having input into SEN provision. SNAs should now attend staff meetings, assist in student centred planning and have input into care plans, engagement with parents and other stakeholders.

9. Does this change how the SNA should support children?

No, the new Circular does not expand the role of the SNA beyond what has become established and accepted practice in schools over many years. Rather, it seeks to reflect the reality of the work already being carried out by SNAs and to formally recognise the vital contribution they make to supporting students and the wider education system on a daily basis.

10. What are core care needs?

Core care needs is a modernised term used to reflect the care needs, on which SNA support may be provided to a child. It effectively replaces the old term “Primary Care Needs” that was set out in Circular 0030/2014 which included things such as: Assistance with feeding; Administration of medicine; Assistance with toileting and general hygiene: (including catheterisation); Assistance with mobility and orientation; Assisting teachers to provide supervision in the class, playground and school grounds; etc.

The new Circular sets out in a clearer and more modern description of what “Core Care Needs” are and provides examples of same.

11. Does the new Circular recognise the role that SNAs play in assisting students to access the curriculum?

Yes. It is recognised that SNAs play an important role in facilitating and enabling students to participate in learning. SNAs provide supplemental, teacher-directed support and assistance with non-instructional tasks. This can include, clarifying tasks, prompting, reinforcing instructions and maintaining attention.

Support for learning includes academic development, independent living and functional life skills, behaviour, and social & emotional wellbeing.

Support for learning is always designed by and delivered under the supervision of a teacher.

12. Are SNAs now expected to be more involved in student centred planning and review processes, is this not a change or enhancement of the role?

It is recognised that the SNA plays an essential role in the development, implementation and review of student support plans. This is because the SNA works closely with students and contributes unique and valuable insights and feedback to support the development of a

tailored planning and review process, to ensure the best outcomes for the student. This recognition further supports the professionalism of the SNA role.

13. Does this new Circular alter the role of the teacher in any way?

No, it remains that the teacher is responsible for the education and personal development of all students in the class, the SNA does not have a teaching role but supports the student's engagement in learning, as they have done for many years. This is now formally recognised.

14. Does the SNA now have sole responsibility for composing support plans etc. for the student?

No, the SNA and the teacher should collaborate regularly. The SNA role is to assist in the composition of support plans etc. for the student(s). It remains the responsibility of the teacher to compose support plans.

15. Do SNAs now have to attend all SENO, psychologists, school staff meetings?

As part of professionalising the role, the SNA now has greater input into such things. However, they should only attend such meetings as required, and with the agreement and guidance of the class teacher/principal.

16. Are SNAs now expected to engage directly with parents/guardians?

SNAs could always engage with parents/guardians in relation to the children in their care, but many schools did not allow it. Again, as part of the professionalisation of the role, it is recognised that SNAs may now communicate with parents/guardians in line with school policy, and as agreed with the principal/teacher.

17. Will this Circular make it clearer as to what can be expected of an SNA and prevent abuses of the role?

Yes. The Circular includes a list of core care needs. It also contains details in relation to other student support duties which includes - Support for Learning; Therapy Supports; Support for Emotional Regulation; Transitions and Other Support Tasks. These support duties are clearly outlined in the Circular, which will avoid any future abuse of the role.

18. Does the Circular alter or change the position with regards to SNAs and supervision?

It is made clear in the Circular, that the role of the SNA is to **assist** teachers with supervision during break time, assembly and dispersal times. It is not appropriate for SNAs to be in a supervisory role for any extended period or to be left with a child or group of children, where the sole purpose of their presence is to supervise.

SNAs may be left for a brief period to provide a comfort/toilet break to a teacher in a classroom setting, or whilst the teacher drops into another classroom briefly.

19. Are SNAs now responsible for the provision or management of therapy services?

No, it is clear that SNAs are not responsible for the management or provision of therapy services to students. Rather, SNAs assist students to access therapy support in schools, or to assist a therapist in providing support to a student, or assist the student to perform therapy tasks, as directed by a therapist.

20. Does this Circular mean we will now be performing therapeutic interventions with children?

No. The SNA can assist a child to carry out a therapeutic intervention; however, they are not responsible for the management or provision of therapy services to students.

The role is to assist the student in accessing therapy or assist the therapist in providing support to a student, alternatively they may assist the student to perform therapy tasks as directed by the therapist.

21. Does the Circular alter our hours of work or working patterns?

No, the working hours have not altered in any way. The new Circular and contract provide greater clarity with regards to working hours. It sets out clearly that the working week (in terms of attendance) is not 32 hours and that the working hours specified in the contract should be the normal classroom hours that the SNA works.

It re-enforces that the periods of time before and after school starts and finishes, are for the specific tasks of preparation/arrival and tidying/dispersal. When these tasks are completed, SNAs should be permitted to leave, and they should not be held in a time-bound fashion.

22. Is the SNA now solely responsible for compiling transitional plans for students moving from school to school?

The role of the SNA is to assist with transition processes to provide structure, enhance understanding and reduce anxiety for the student. This can involve collaboration and planning for transitions with the teacher or principal, transitions between schools with the principal or delegate. For example: using strategies (schedules and communication aids) or visits to a new school setting for students with SEN, to meet staff and to familiarise themselves with the new setting.

23. What are “Other Support Tasks”?

Other support tasks are tasks outside of the “core care needs” but would still be appropriate tasks to the SNA role, these can include the following: Assisting students with SEN to participate in PE, swimming, and other sporting activities or events; Providing input on care needs in school reports, files, or journal; Assist in the planning and preparation of files or records for students receiving SNA support; Participate in school planning and

policy development and in whole school staff meetings, where appropriate; Assist teachers with supervision at break times in the yard and in classroom; Engage where there may be additional care or assistance requirement for certain classes or projects.

24. Are SNAs expected to get into the pool with the child during swimming”?

Yes, the position that the Department holds is that one of the key criteria for the requirement of an SNA position in a school, is to ensure the health, safety and welfare of SEN students in schools. They hold a view that a part of the SNA contract is to assist SEN students in accessing their curriculum. Which means, SNAs are required to help support the student in the water, during swimming lessons as part of their core duties.

This does not mean that the SNA is teaching the child swimming, they should be taught by an appropriate swim teacher, the SNA is there to support the child to access the learning.

However, they acknowledge and accept that there are instances where SNAs either have a fear of water, cannot swim, are weak swimmers or have another medical reason which renders it impossible for them to fulfil the functions associated with swimming. If it is the case that an SNA is medically certified by their doctor as being unable to perform this duty, then they should present a copy of this medical certificate to the principal of the school.

25. Have 72-hours been abolished, if not why?

The 72 hours have been abolished in their existing form. However, on foot of the professionalisation of the SNA role, there is a requirement to undertake CPD, engage in staff meetings, student centred planning and other elements of work, that cannot be undertaken during classroom time.

To do this there is a new provision entitled “School Community Time” to allow such work to be undertaken, outside of the normal class hours. These new provisions address the need for CPD and other learning and development which cannot be carried out while SNAs are supporting students during the school day. It covers training (CPD), engagement in staff meetings, student centred planning, reviewing and collaboration with colleagues on SEN provision and policies.

These new provisions should not be open to misinterpretation in the way in which the old 72-hour obligation had been and should not see SNAs being held at a whim, in a time-bound manner, or requested to undertake duties inappropriate for an SNA.

26. How does this address the abuse of the 72-hours and ensure that schools don’t continue to abuse them into the future?

The Circular provides very clear direction as to how School Community Time (SCT) time is utilised. It is also explicitly stated that tasks or duties will be determined by the needs of the students with SEN and the training needs of the SNA, as agreed by the principal. The new provisions will provide members and the union with a much stronger position to immediately challenge any attempted misuse.

27. Are SNAs mandated to undertake training now?

As has always been the case, mandatory training such as child protection, manual handling, health and safety etc. as determined by the Board of Management/ETB will be undertaken by all staff and arranged and paid for by the school directly. Any specific training required to support a student, or students, will be provided for and paid by the school. Other learning and develop training will be provided and paid for centrally by the Department, through education centres.

28. Will SNAs have to find and pay for training courses themselves?

No, SNAs should not be compelled to find or fund their own training and development, however, if an SNA wished to undertake a training course, relevant to their role, they can make an application to the school for funding. If the school approve and pay for the training, they should agree time be deducted from the Learning & Development hours allocated under SCT, as appropriate.

29. Do courses have to hold relevance to the SNA role?

Yes, courses should maintain a relevance to the SNA role save for the mandatory training, as provided for by the Board of Management/ETB which would be undertaken by all staff i.e. manual handling, health & safety. Any other training needs to be relevant to the SNA role, as set out in the new Circular.

30. What are policy planning/whole school collaboration meetings and how can they be scheduled?

Policy planning/whole school collaboration meetings are time spent collaborating or consulting within the school on policy development or other school matters (where relevant).

These meetings are typically scheduled outside of the classroom time to ensure the students are not impacted. Meetings should be scheduled in advance, to provide as much notice as possible to SNAs and time recorded will be deducted from SCT hours.

31. Do SNAs need to sit in on meetings that are exclusively regarding teachers' issues?

No. However, if the meeting is to address SEN students or issues regarding SEN provisions that affect SNAs in general, then it would be appropriate for SNAs to attend the meeting.

32. Why do we need to complete forms recording the hours done if they are not a target?

The form is required to validate the time spent in any of the three categories and provides security for SNAs that the time is utilised appropriately. The recording of

time, will safeguard against potential abuse of School Community Time and importantly, reinforce the professionalisation of the SNA role.

There is also an obligation to record any working time/hours, under both Health and Safety Acts and The Organisation of Working Time Act.

33. What has changed in relation to June Working?

The union had made significant progress on preventing abuses of June Working following the issuing of the clarification letter from the Department on the 30th of May 2023. The protections and provisions outlined in that letter have assisted the union in dealing with many cases where June Working was not being utilised appropriately, once members stood together and followed the union advice/guidance.

The new Circular further clarifies what can be required in June and predominantly focuses on where students who have had SEN support through the year, may require SNA support as they undertake exams.

The Circular enhances the protection that SNAs should not be requested to attend work without legitimate reason, and that any attendance is determined by the duties required.

The union is confident that the new provisions in June, strengthen our ability to ensure that members are only required to attend in such circumstances, and will allow us to intervene in the strongest possible way where members make us aware that schools act to the contrary and efforts to resolve locally have been unsuccessful.

34. During June can they demand we come into work each day for set times, even when there is nothing to do?

No, this is now clearly stipulated in the Circular. June is considered differently to the rest of the year and any attendance deemed necessary should be determined by the duties/tasks required. SNAs should not be asked to report for work as normal, or for fixed hours in a time-bound manner. E.g. 9am to 2pm daily, or any other time bound pattern.

35. What does it mean that work must be SEN related and SNA appropriate?

It means that the duties must be related to the provision of Special Education and would not exist in the event there were no SEN children in the school, they also must be appropriate to the new SNA contract and circular and the examples set out within.

36. What happens if we complete/finish the tasks identified, do we have to stay until the normal time?

No, you should not be required to stay until a certain time at any point, once the identified tasks for that day are completed you should be free to leave for that day, or for the summer once all tasks identified have been completed.

37. Does setting up an exam centre mean moving furniture?

No, whilst SNAs may assist students by setting up their equipment and making sure that they have everything they require, this does not involve moving furniture. This would be displacement of a caretaker's role and is specifically precluded as per the Circular.

38. I am not skilled in ICT; will I be expected to use ICT equipment or set it up?

No, whilst SNAs may assist students by setting up their equipment and getting them ready. They should not be asked to do tasks or duties that they are not trained/qualified to do. If the SNA is familiar with the equipment/software they can assist by ensuring it is ready and functioning/set-up properly, but they should not be tasked with duties that they are not appropriately trained/qualified to do, or competent in.

39. Can I be compelled to be a superintendent, reader, scribe or exam aide?

No, special centre superintendent, reader, scribe and exam aide are not compulsory roles, they are separate paid posts, and an SNA can volunteer to undertake them should they so wish. They cannot be compelled to do them.

40. What does assist students with SEN as required during exams mean?

It means assisting the student in the same way as you would throughout the year in meeting their care needs, regulation etc. The role of the SNA remains the same, even during exam time.

41. Can we undertake training at home during June?

Yes, this is stated in the Circular, provided it is possible to do so being cognisant of GDPR issues etc.

42. How do the NCSE allocate posts, is it based on primary / core needs only?

This is covered in previous points. It is expected that the NCSE will issue a document later this year providing more clarity/detail on the allocations process and how they determine SNA support is warranted in a school.

43. Will there still be the usual delay and upset over the late publishing of allocations come the end of the school year?

Allocations will now be announced earlier in the year, around Easter/the same time as the SET allocations. This is to facilitate the new redeployment scheme. SNAs and schools will need clarity on who is going where in advance of the school year ending and, the allocations need to be announced to allow the SNA/NCSE/schools navigate the mechanics of the redeployment scheme in time.

44. Has there been any progress on reducing casual employment use of substitution/fixed term contracts?

The union have made significant progress in enhancing job security and reducing casualisation of the workforce through the new allocations process and the SNA redeployment scheme. We also made further gains by obtaining clearer provisions and guidance on when fixed-term and substitute contracts should be used appropriately and secured a Circular which provides for CIDs for those who have had two or more fixed-term/specified purpose contracts span a period of 4 years or more.

This will eliminate SNAs being retained on fixed term of specified purpose contracts for extended periods and compel schools/BOMs to give proper consideration to whether or not to use these contracts .

45. Can the principal or BOM assign me as a whole school resource to all children?

SNAs are no longer assigned to specific students on the basis of an assessment of need, or diagnosis, save for where there is a specific court order or SENO decision.

The principal or BOM should assign SNAs to those with the greatest level of need. The role remains directly aligned with SEN provision and the duties must be appropriate to the role of the SNA, as outlined in the contracts, circulars and guidance.

There will now be an accountability on schools to the Department's Inspectorate, who now have a role in ensuring schools deploy SNA resources appropriately, as part of their inspections.

46. Is there any change or clarity with regards catheterisation?

The issue of catheterisation has been a difficult one for the union and its members over the years but remained undetermined because an individual case had never gone to 3rd party to decide whether the duty was appropriate to SNAs.

The Department held a clear view that it was, and it was covered in the contract under assistance with toileting. The union has advised members in the past that where catheterisation is required, they should receive professional training, the training should ensure that they are comfortable in undertaking the procedure and certify same. We also seek that there is clear indemnification provided from the school insurance to allow SNAs undertake this procedure under the direction of the principal or BOM.

As part of this process, we asked that expert clinical advice be obtained to determine the appropriateness of SNAs undertaking the procedure and specifying what measures would be required.

Advice has been received from Children's Health Ireland (CHI) who are the lead authority on the clinical and operational transformation of acute paediatric healthcare.

CHI has advised that clean intermittent catheterisation is a duty that would be appropriate to the SNA role, provided the assurances the union had been requesting regarding certified training and insurance indemnification are in place. They have stated that in-dwelling catheterisation is not a procedure appropriate to SNAs.

47. Who ensures that there is adherence with the DEY policy or NCSE Guidance?

The contract review discussions involved engagement from all stakeholders, including management bodies and school leaders. The engagement worked with the intent of eliminating any ambiguity or confusion that existed within the SNA role.

The new provisions should bring clarity to all in relation to what is appropriate for, and what can be expected of SNAs.

It is in nobody's interest to allow breaches occur or allow poor practices to embed into the sector, once the new provisions are in place and the circular, contracts and guidance documents, published.

As part of the discussions, the union has secured an agreement to either establish a new national forum, or utilise the existing SNA IR forum, to monitor compliance/adherence with the new provisions.

This means that the union will be able to act swiftly in terms of advising or instructing our members as to what they should/should not do, and to bring issues directly with the Department, seeking that they take action to ensure they protect the integrity of the new provisions.