

Investigating the impact of NCSE frontline services from the perspective of multiple stakeholders

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 - Relationships, communication and collaboration
 - What is working well and what could improve
 - The policy and practice landscape
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Context for the Commission

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At the point of commissioning the study the context included:

Sustained and dramatic increase in demand for NCSE frontline services between 2010 and 2022

- Special classes: +556% primary, +665% post-primary
- Special Needs Assistants: +44%
- Diagnosis of autism: +2.5%
- Special classes autism: +904%, early intervention classes: +619%

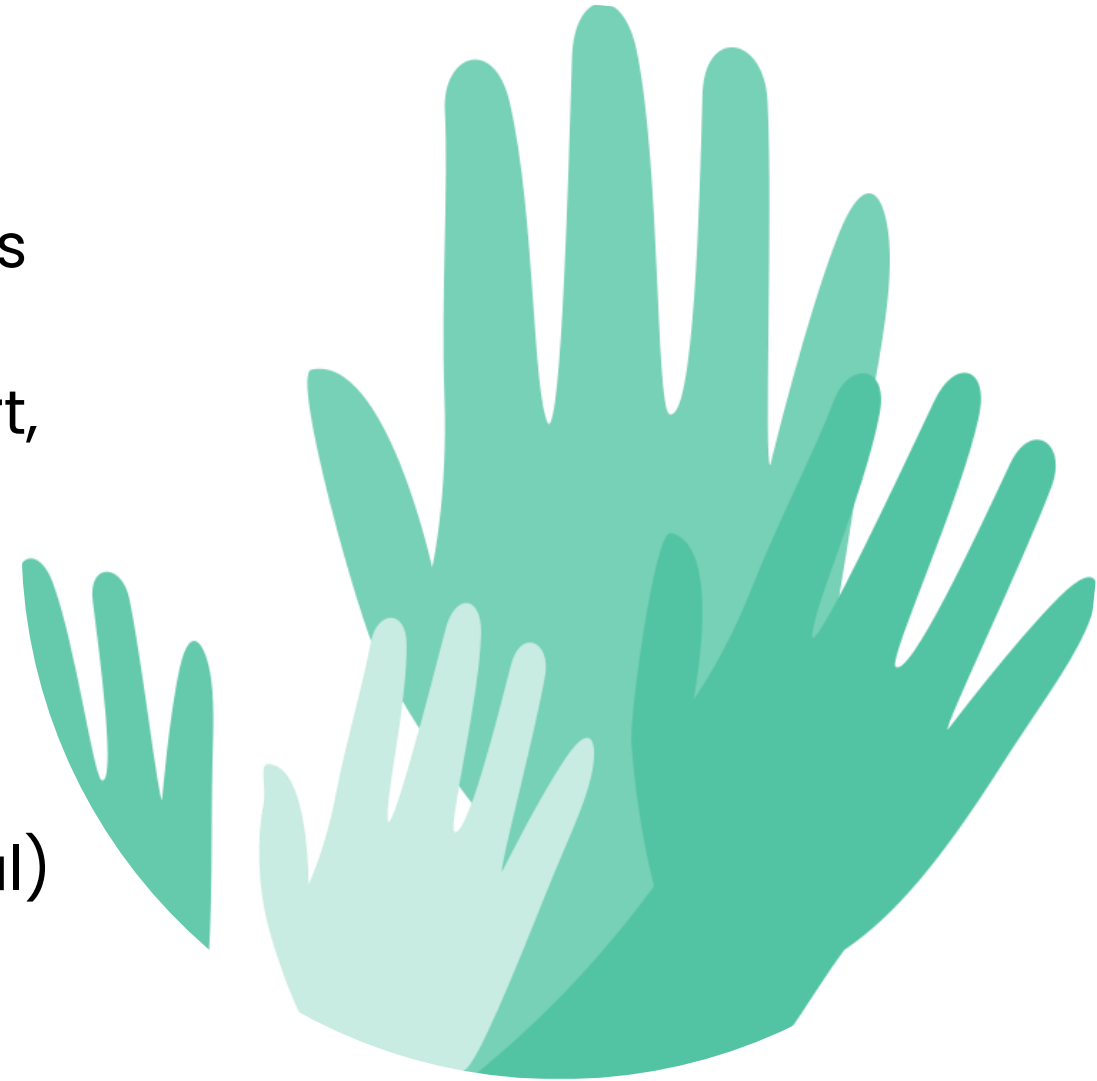


Up to 2022, NCSE workforce numbers stable in context of rising need

- Budget 23: €13 increase in funding for NCSE enabling:
 - **160 additional staff** for the NCSE
 - Estimated 2024 Numbers include:
 - Doubling of SENO posts,
 - Increase in team managers, NCSE advisors, administrative staff
 - Introduction of tutors in Irish Sign Language (ISL)

NCSE frontline services researched

- Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO)
- Special Education Teacher (SET) and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) allocations and exceptional reviews
- Applications and allocations for transport, equipment, and home tuition
- Visiting Teacher Service (VTS)
- NCSE In-School Advisory Service
- Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)
- NCSE website (Including the School Portal)
- NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers and schools.



Methodological Design



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Method 1
Contextual Review
What is the policy and practice landscape that NCSE frontline services operate within?
Over 44 sources

Method 2
Online Survey
771 parents/carers
558 school staff
1,329

Method 3
In-depth Semi Structured Interviews
12 parents/carers
12 school staff
9 NCSE services delivers
33

Method 4
Case Studies
Schools and individual children within those schools
9 schools
9 children

Phase 1
Contextualisation
September to December 2022



Phase 2
Distance Field Work
Instrument design, piloting and implementation
April 2023 to June 2023



Phase 3
Face to Face Field work
April 2023 to October 2023

Total of **1,377** stakeholders participated

Case studies of schools and students with SEN in those schools

The case study element of the research was implemented by six Teacher Researchers (TRs)

- Practice experts in inclusive practice
- Currently working in teaching roles in schools
- Case studies engaged parents/carers, school staff and students with special educational needs
- Inclusive method (ethnographic mapping) to elicit students' experience of inclusion in their schools
- Effectiveness of this method evaluated by Robinson et al., (2024) among others



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Research Questions



Research Questions



Investigating the impact of the NCSEs frontline services from the perspective of multiple stakeholders

What is the **impact** of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers, and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?

What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, **communication, and collaboration** in the context of NCSE's frontline services?

What is the **policy and practice landscape** that the NCSE services operate within?

What is **working well** to deliver impacts, and what **improvements** could be made?

Theme 1: Impact as perceived by stakeholders (RQ2)

Descriptions of impact

Process schema dominant over impact-schema*

Theme 2: Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment (RQ3, RQ4)

Crucial role of the SENO

Sustained personalised relationships and their value

Communication continuum from responsive to isolating

Theme 3: The right support in the right place at the right time (RQ1, RQ2, RQ4)

The value of the additional support enabled/delivered by the NCSE's frontline services

Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiencies in capacity and support

Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment*

Theme 4: Collaboration and (mis)understanding (RQ1, RQ4)

Mutuality, trust and collaboration

Knowledge of the NCSE, and public relations

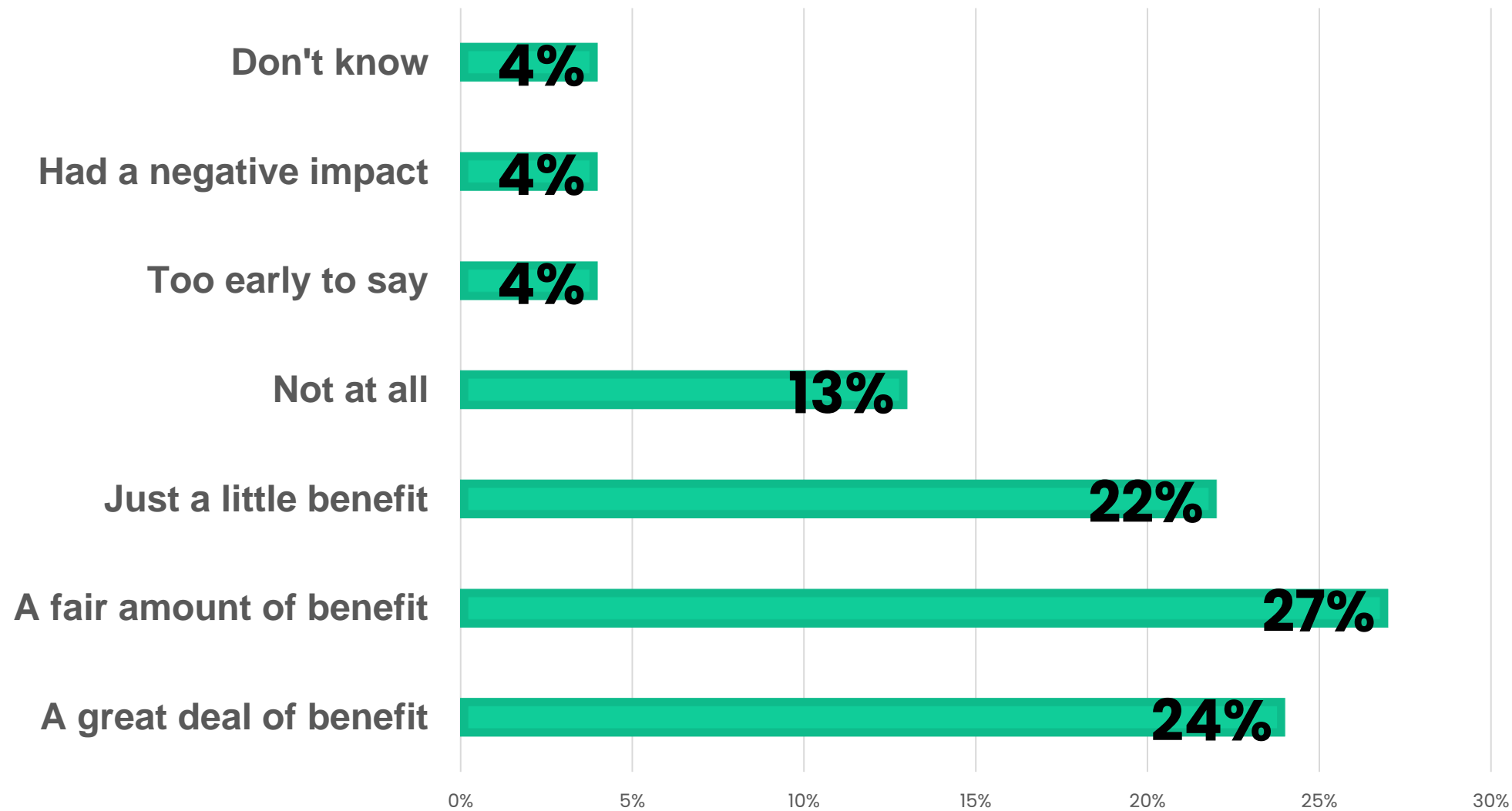
Thematic Map: The four themes and ten subthemes identified

What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers, and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?



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A majority (51%) of parents/carers perceived that NCSE frontline services had provided significant benefit to their children



D2-1

Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, have NCSE services benefited your child?

Base: all parents who had received NCSE services (n=647)

When reflecting on specific frontline services, most or a majority identified positive impacts

- Positive impact on **access to education**: VTS (81%), SENO support in school placements (65%), Home Tuition (62%), School transport (58%).
- **Social benefits and inclusion**: VTS (58%), SENO support for SNA allocation (53%).
- **Improved wellbeing** (SENO support for SNA allocation, 53%) and **educational progress** (survey free text, qualitative data)

Our child is in mainstream school learning with his peers, learning to socialise, make friends and be included, and he's thriving. His speech is better.

[Parent/Carer, survey]

[It's great] to see my child grow and learn and be in line with his peers. The look of pure joy on his face when he achieves something in school to the level of his peers.

[Parent/Carer, survey]

The attention she gets has been ... the main benefit. It matters that they're caring as well in that they're chilled.

The ratio and the attention she gets has just been really helpful. She just really needs that attention.

And also, the class size - they're physically in a big room and it's a small class. All the autism classes have six students maximum. So, it's a small class so she hasn't gone into the mainstream class for lessons at all ... She joined them outdoors and for play and she joins the mainstream for school tours and any events like that.

She did the Christmas concert, and she was up on stage with all the class.

[Parent/carer 5 of child with autism, in-depth interview, special class in mainstream school, mixed to positive sentiment].

School staff had a more limited view of the impact of NCSE frontline services compared to parents/carers

Minority of school staff perceived benefits to knowledge, confidence, processes and practices in their schools related to special educational needs and inclusion (40%, 34%, 36%, 32% respectively, survey)

Majority perceived little, no or detrimental impacts (58%, 62%, 61%, 65% respectively, survey) when considering benefits to the school, and students with special educational needs more generally.

PROCESSES

Process Schema were dominant over Impact Schema

Process schema

Connected concepts of effect from applications, operations, relational processes

Impact schema

Connected concepts of effect on students' access, development, wellbeing, participation, inclusion, transition, adulthood

When interviewing school staff and NCSE staff, the dominant focus was on the **experience of processes** (e.g. workload, onerousness, bureaucracy) rather than the **impact of services on students.**

PROCESS

Possible explanations for **dominance of process schema** in the data

School staff conceive positive impact as getting the resource needed

Participants were relating stories of *process* that had **emotional resonance** being:

- Frustrating
- Energy-sapping
- Time-consuming
- Isolating
- Designed to put you off

[There are] too many obstacles towards efficient application for resources. Decision making appears to be opaque and not transparent.

I don't apply for resources much anymore as the application process is too stressful.

[Leader, Survey]

IMPACT

Students in the case studies

- Did not comment directly on NCSE frontline services (understandably), but all nine communicated a sense of belonging in their schools.
- Explained how key staff, particularly SNAs supported their inclusion, wellbeing and participation.
- Interaction between parent/carers, school staff and NCSE frontline service staff, had been an important part of the story in achieving the outcomes.

IMPACT



- The student is 14-years old.
- They attend a mainstream post-primary school.
- They are assessed with a mild general learning difficulty and a diagnosis of dyslexia.
- They are engaging with a Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LP)

Findings on relationships, communication and collaboration from the perspective of stakeholders



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Relationships, communication and collaboration

The SENO role regarded as crucial: SENOs were seen as the 'face of then NCSE.'

Interactions with SENOs influence perceptions of the NCSE, and its frontline services

- Availability, relational skill and competence of SENOs seen as critical for knowing about and accessing additional support
- Decreases in face-to-face contact with SENOs, reduced visibility in schools
- Many school staff felt that decreases in visibility had impacted on the NCSEs reputation

“[The SENO] gave me specific advice on the school applications for the autism classes [...].

If I hadn't spoken to her, I wouldn't have known.

So, it was the one-to-one interaction that helped me get that information.”

[Parent/carer 10, in-depth interview, child with autism attending special class, positive sentiment].

"I ended up getting a contact with the manager of the SENO.

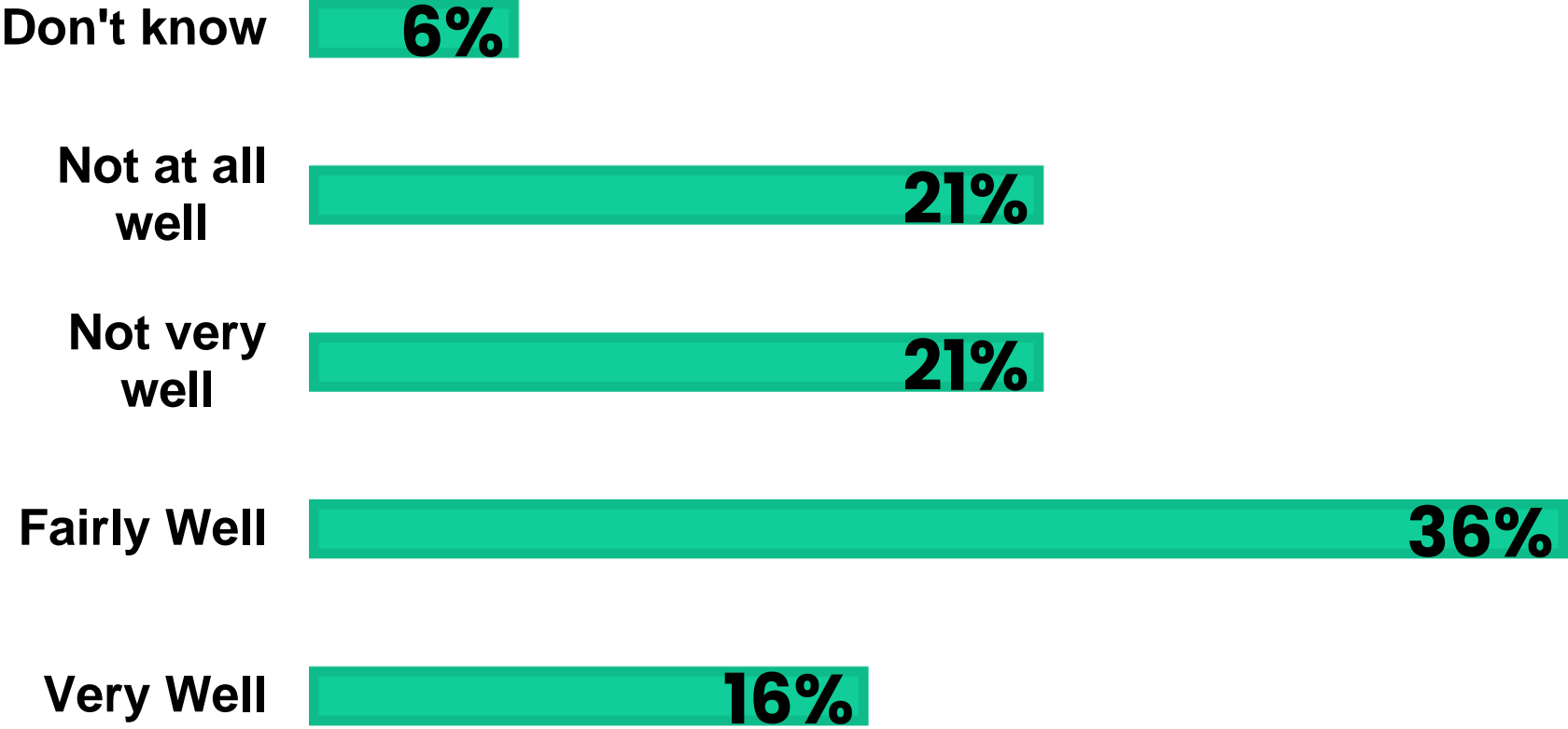
And she was a very, very big help to me - she was advocating like on my son's behalf. She was trying to get other schools to open places because there were a few parents at the time where kids had nowhere to go.

And she actually ended up opening a second class in that school - she was in constant contact with me and was trying to help me find another place and then eventually he got a place in a special school instead of pre-school.

"

[Parent/carer 3, in-depth interview, child with autism attending special school, mixed sentiment]

A majority (52%) of parents/carers are positive about how well the SENO supported them and their child



C5: How well, if at all, do you feel the SENO has supported you and your child?

Base:
Parents/carers who received support from SENO

N=495

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

“The SENO was extremely rude and
condescending.

She was patronising and argumentative and
the meeting we had with her was one of the
worst experiences of my life.

It was obvious she was there to allocate as few
resources as possible and had no interest in
the best interests of my child. ”

[Parent/Carer, Survey]

NCSE & Parent/Carer Communication

- Parent/carers wanted better communication with the NCSE, more transparency, and a stronger partnership with schools.
- Parent/carers wanted to be involved in discussion, planning and decision making.
- A culture of communication, collegiality and co-operation



Low awareness and confusion about the NCSE and its services

Many stakeholders had limited knowledge of NCSE services

School staff reported a lack of familiarity with NCSE services.

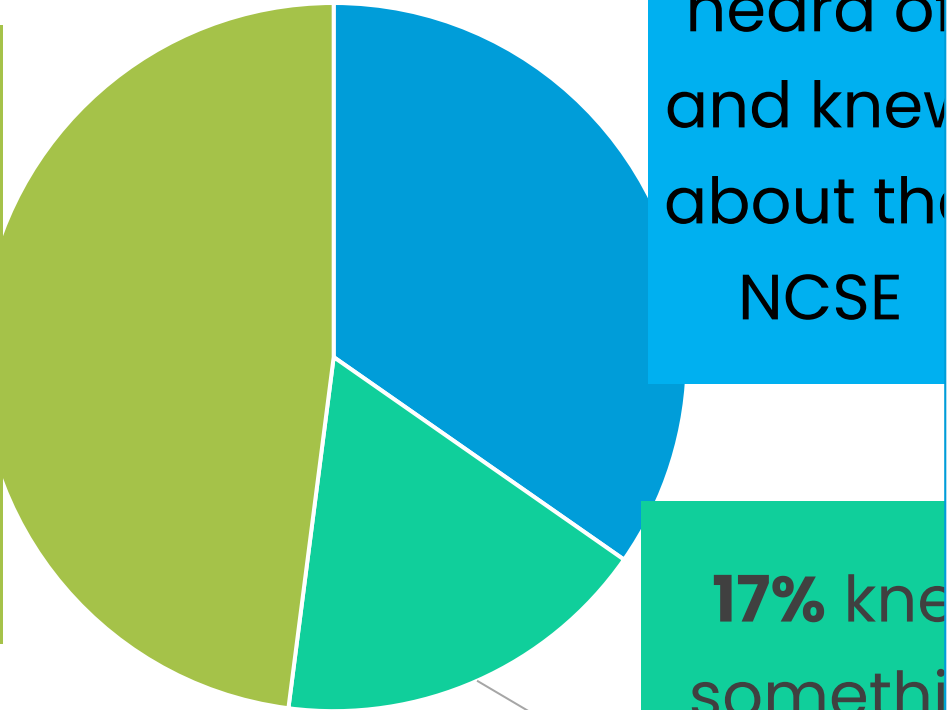
- Their knowledge came from direct interactions with NCSE frontline staff, particularly SENOs
- Confusion about who was responsible for what, often led to frustration and a "**pillar to post**" experience for parents/carers and school staff
- Confusion led to frustration, and feelings of isolation

Findings on the policy and practice landscape



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47%
had
never
heard of
the NCSE



34%
heard of
and knew
about the
NCSE

17% knew
something
about the
NCSE

Awareness of the NCSE among parents/carers is relatively low (66%). Many participants suggested that there could be better communication about what the NCSE do and how they may support parents.

“There needs to be an advertising campaign to highlight your service to parents”
[Parent/carer, survey]

B1 Which of the following best describes your awareness of the National Council for Education (NCSE)?
Parents/Carers
Base: All respondents (n=771)

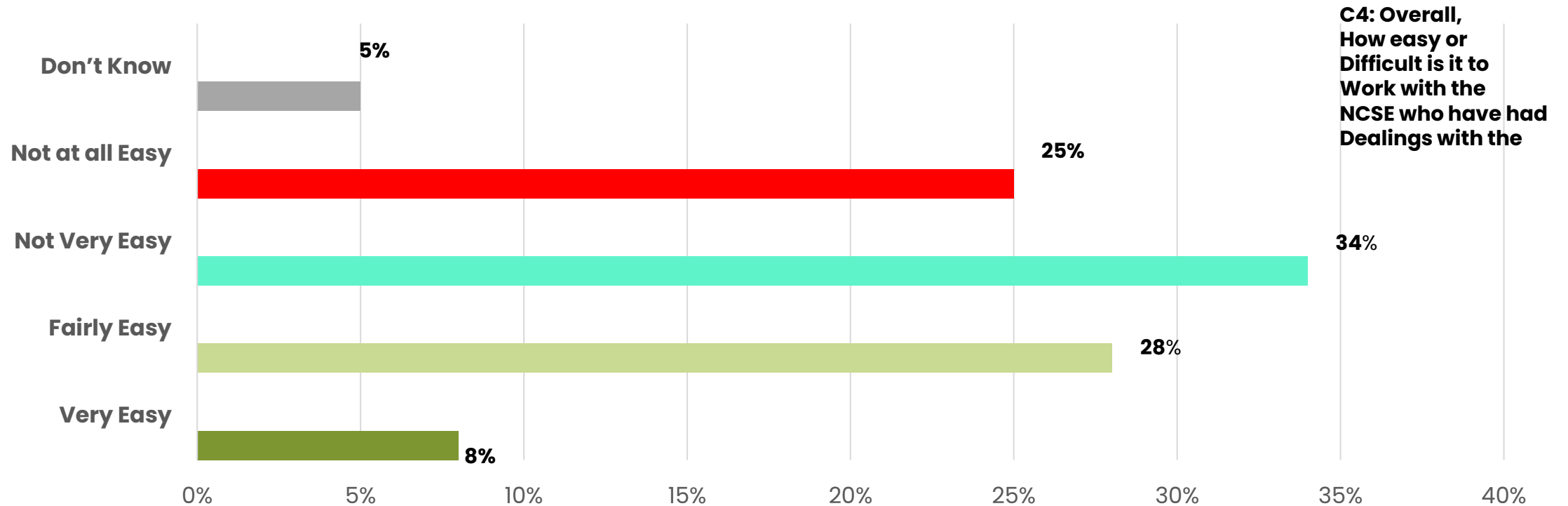
An experience of onerous, energy-sapping bureaucracy mediated sentiments about the NCSE and its frontline services

- Process of application for additional resources complex, onerous and opaque
- Long delays during the application process, and repeated, complex steps frustrated service users
- Fractured communication was experienced by many



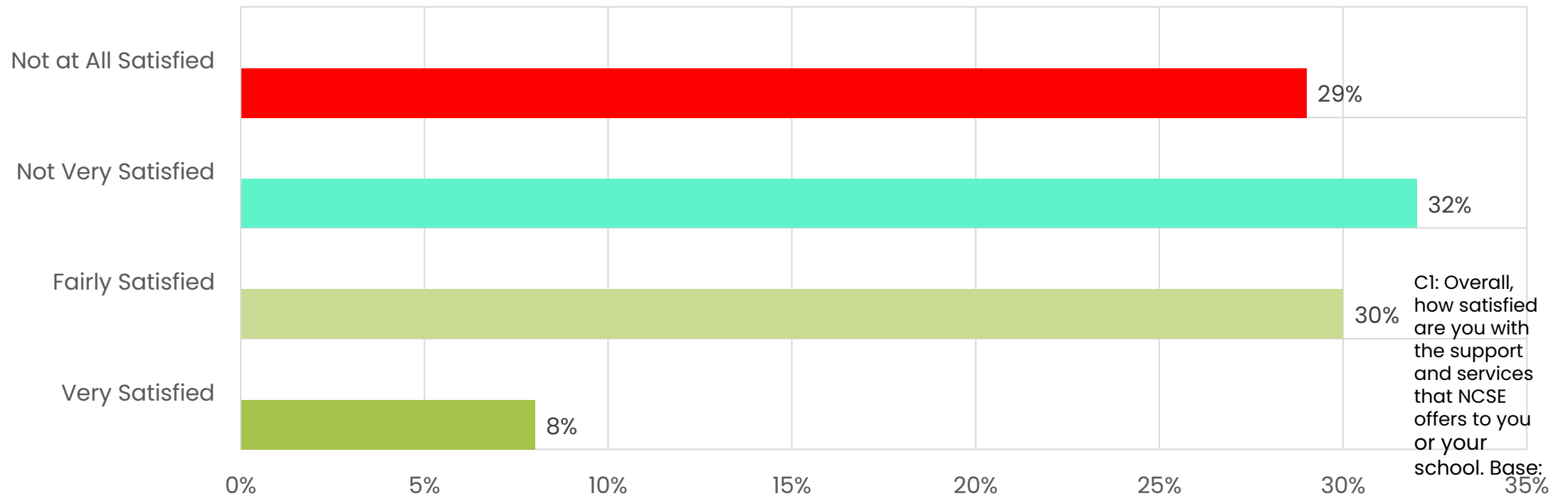
Survey Results

A majority of school staff (59%) did not find the NCSE easy to work with



Survey Results

A majority (61%) school staff dissatisfied with the support and services offered by the NCSE to their School Community





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**What is working well and what
could be improved?**

What is working well?

- NCSE frontline services are highly valued, and often prized by parents/carers and school staff.
- The VTS, NCSE advisory service, SENO role, TPL, additional resources (such as technology), school transport, website resources, NCSE guides, and research are all identified to varied extent and in varied ways as valuable and relevant services.
- A majority of parents/carers report that NCSE frontline services bring positive benefits to children's educational access, inclusion, wellbeing and educational progress.

What is working well?

- Many participants have worked with NCSE staff who are skilled and effective in their knowledge, capabilities, and relational work.
- NCSE staff and the organisation are open to learning and are reflective and committed to improvement.
- Students told their own, positive stories of inclusion, representing the positive impact of an assembled continuum of support on their wellbeing, belonging, and participation.
- This happened even when school staff and parents/carers report difficulties in their interactions with NCSE frontline services.

What needs to be developed?

Messages from Participants

Increase Capacity

Services are valued but most participants perceive insufficiencies.

A need to ensure sufficient and responsive support for families and school communities.

Increase relational capacity

A need to develop the capacity of frontline staff to engage in relational work with parents/carers and school communities (e.g. increased face-to-face contact, greater personalisation, active listening, mutual respect).

Quality of relationships and communication mediates sentiment about the NCSE and its services

What needs to be developed?

Messages from Participants

Prioritise responsive communication

Timely communication (e.g. responses to e-mails, calls, visit planning, following up) are a priority for service users.

Streamline processes

Negative experiences were leading to frustration and distrust, as well as obstructing line of sight on impact

Bureaucracy was a mediator of sentiment.

Develop an impact focussed culture

A shift of discourse in the direction of impact (and away from process) may bring more systemic focus on inclusive outcomes for students with special educational needs.

Catalysing collaboration along a continuum of support where agents in the system take responsibility for inclusive impacts **when support is moving hand to hand** or working **in parallel** across a network.

What needs to be developed?

Messages from Participants

Centralise trust and collegiality

Better partnership, collegiality and collaboration between school communities, its frontline services, the NCSE and other sectors (e.g., CDNT's) is important.

Parents/carers want to be kept informed and kept at the centre of dialogue and planning for their child.

They want people to work together.

Public relations and awareness raising

Awareness-raising initiatives regarding the NCSE's role and its services could improve service users' perceptions of quality and impact.

While some participants reported that they knew how to access services, many others felt unsure.

7. Implications and Reflections



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Key points

NCSE frontline services are valued by service users and are regarded as crucial for inclusive education for students with special educational needs.

They are the right services.

BUT

From the perspective of service users, there are **resource insufficiencies, process obstacles, communication issues, and relational needs** that need priority attention.



Implications

And yes, this means:

- Continuing cultural transformation for the NCSE, its frontline services In the context of Vision 26
- Attention to relational work and quality in *each and every* interaction with parents/carers and school staff, across all services
- A continuing focus on operational excellence

But it also means building a system with a culture of collective responsibility for pursuing and knowing inclusive impacts:

- **along a continuum** (from hand to hand) and
- **in parallel** (simultaneously)

Full Research Report

The full research report will be published shortly by the NCSE

Robinson, D., Codina, G., O'Sullivan, L., Ring, E., Catterson, L., Luke, Ni Luanaigh, A., Brett, A., Maloy, L., Matasovska, K., and Shepherd, R. *Investigating the impact of NCSE frontline services from the perspective of multiple stakeholders: Full technical and research report.* Trim, Co. Meath: NCSE.

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Robinson D, Codina G. Children and Practitioners as Truth Seekers and Truth Tellers: Innovative, Counter-Hegemonic Approaches to Evaluating National Inclusion Policies. *Education Sciences*. 2024; 14(4):414. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci1404041>