



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

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

Full technical and research report

Deborah Robinson, Geraldene Codina, Lisha O'Sullivan, Emer Ring,
Luke Catterson, Aoife Ni Luanaigh, Adam Brett, Liam Maloy,
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Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CBA	Cost Benefit Analysis
CDNT	Children Disability Network Teams
CYP	Children and Young People
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivery Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills/Science
DoH	Department of Health
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EBD	Emotional and Behavioural difficulties
EPISE	Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive & Special Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
GAM	General Allocation Model
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GLDD	General Learning Disabilities or Difficulties
HSE	Health and Safety Executive
HT	Home Tuition
IEP	Individualised Education Plan
IRIS	Inclusive Research in Irish Schools report 2015
ISL	Irish Sign Language
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
MGLD	Moderate General Learning Disorder
MIC	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service

ODD	Oppositional Defiance Disorder
OT	Occupational Therapy
PEP-3	Psychoeducational profile – 3rd edition
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
RQ	Research Question
SCERTS®	Social Communication; Emotional Regulation' Transactional Support
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Education Needs and Disabilities
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SERI	Special Education Research Initiative
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning
TR	Teacher-Researcher
UoD	University of Derby
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VB-MAPP	Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment and Placement Programme
VT	Visiting Teacher
VTS	Visiting Teacher Service

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Foreword

We are pleased to publish this evaluation on the impact of NCSE frontline services conducted by the University of Derby (UoD) Consortium. The purpose of the evaluation was to gain insight into how service users' perceive NCSE frontline services as a comprehensive support package. The findings in this evaluation are based on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders who engage with NCSE services, including over 770 parents/carers, 558 school staff and students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) across nine case study schools.

This evaluation was commissioned at a time when the NCSE was commencing a significant organisational review and workforce expansion. Government funding to the NCSE was substantially increased in Budget 2023 to enable growth in the NCSE's frontline workforce in response to an exponential growth in demand for NCSE services. It is important to note that the evaluation was active prior to the expansion of the NCSE's staffing and participants' perceptions may be influenced by their experiences of a stretched NCSE workforce.

This evaluation finds that the NCSE's frontline services are highly valued by service users, with examples of both positive experience and positive impact across all types of service. The authors note that NCSEs' services are well aligned with the needs of service users and Ireland's progress towards establishing a world-class, inclusive education system. However, this is only true when services are functioning effectively, are personalised, responsive and adequately resourced, which the report finds has not always been the case. Some service users who were less positive, perceived that they did not receive enough support, or at least enough support to make a difference.

The findings also indicate that NCSE staff demonstrate high levels of expertise, as a result, service users who engage with them find it valuable and impactful. However, experiences and perceptions varied greatly across the data, with reports of low responsiveness, poor communication and strained relationships raising significant concerns. The evaluation also finds that the NCSE's frontline services are the right shape for Ireland, but their size and the consistency of their quality needs attention.

We have learnt from this evaluation that continuous improvement to our frontline services, and to public perceptions of these services and the NCSE, will be vital to achieving a world-class, inclusive education system in Ireland. Building on these findings we have an opportunity to evolve to a more impact-focused model of service, planning and collaboration so that all stakeholders can work together to achieve a shared vision for inclusion and a shared understanding of the outcomes they are pursuing together. The NCSE transformative programme Vision 26 provides a framework to drive these improvements. This includes a new organisational design that changes the structure of the organisation, aligning key functions to primary and secondary/support activities and extensively enhancing the number of frontline staff to better respond to the needs of students, parents and schools. By prioritising increased visibility, responsiveness, communication, personalisation and a more collaborative culture within the NCSE and its frontline services, service-user perceptions and experiences are likely to improve significantly.

Going forward, the NCSE will continue to ensure that our work is informed by evidence gathered from young people and other stakeholders in the special education sector.

I would like to thank the research team in this consortium which includes researchers from the University of Derby; Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; and IFF Research; London. I also want to thank sincerely the parents/carers, school staff, NCSE staff and students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) who took the time to participate in this study.

John Kearney

Chief Executive Officer.

Evaluation of the NCSE's frontline services: Executive summary

This report summarises the context, methodological approach and findings from the evaluation of the NCSE's frontline services, commissioned by the NCSE in 2022 and completed in 2023. It begins with a description of the context in which the research took place.

Context

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned the University of Derby (UoD) Consortium to complete an independent evaluation of the quality and impact of its frontline services from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders included parents/carers, school staff, NCSE staff and students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This was at a time when the NCSE was commencing workforce expansion and developing an associated strategy termed *Vision 2026*. This transformation programme provides for a strategic workforce reform with design principles centred on service responsiveness, effectiveness and consistency. Government funding to the NCSE was substantially increased in Budget 2023 to enable growth in the NCSE's frontline workforce. To contextualise this further, in Ireland there has been a rapid growth in demand for support services related to SEN. Indicative of increasing resources is an 81 per cent rise in special needs assistants (SNAs) and a 44 per cent increase in special education teachers (SETs) in 2022 compared to 2010. Investment in SEN accounted for 27 per cent of Exchequer funding for education in 2023-2024. In Ireland, the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has risen from 1.5 per cent in 2021 to over 4 per cent in 2023, and autism classes have seen dramatic growth rates of 904 per cent in primary and post-primary schools, with a 619 per cent increase for early-intervention classes. More generally, there has been growth in special classes in mainstream schools, with a 556 per cent rise in primary schools and a 665 per cent rise in post-primary schools between 2010 to 2022. In the context of rising demands, the NCSE's staffing had remained static up until 2022. Following the €13 million increase in government funding to the NCSE in Budget 23, recruitment of over 160 additional staff, including special educational needs organisers (SENOs), was initiated. Since 2022, the estimated NCSE workforce has grown from 230.5 to 426 in 2024. This included a doubling of SENO roles. Workforce expansion also saw a significant increase in the number of team managers, specialist leads, advisors, administration staff and, for the first time, the recruitment of NCSE Irish Sign Language (ISL) advisors¹. This expansion reflects the NCSE's response to growing need, and relatedly, the Government of Ireland's commitment to developing a world-class education system in Ireland (Kearney, 2023).

¹ The Irish Sign Language Act, passed in 2017, officially recognised ISL as a native and independent language in Ireland. The Act ensures that public services are accessible to ISL users, promoting equal rights and inclusion for the Irish deaf community.

The NCSE's frontline services

It is important to clarify the focus of this evaluation through explaining what is meant by 'frontline services' in this study. Services described as frontline are those that are most visible to stakeholders in their day-to-day encounters with NCSE staff, services and processes. In the evaluation, the services of interest were:

- SENOs
- Visiting Teacher Service (VTS)
- NCSE In-School Advisory Service
- Special education teacher (SET) and SNA allocations
- applications and allocations for transport, equipment and home tuition (HT)
- teacher professional learning (TPL)
- NCSE website (including the School Support Portal)
- NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers and schools.

The purpose of the evaluation was not to compare one frontline service with another. That is, the evaluation was not about comparing quality, value or impact, nor about identifying which services were performing better or worse, but to gain insight into service users' perceptions of NCSE frontline services as a comprehensive support package. Furthermore, comparisons would not be appropriate or meaningful because each service is designed to meet specific needs and operates within different contexts, making direct comparison misleading. Additionally, focusing on comparison could overlook the broader goal of understanding how these services collectively contribute to overall outcomes for users, and what wider lessons can be learned from their study.

The research questions (RQs) for the study

Four core research questions (RQs) were investigated in the evaluation as follows:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

At the inception of the project, the research team was commissioned to address the following RQ as their first task: What evaluation methodology is the best fit for a commission centred on evaluating the NCSE's frontline services? Following a review of national and international literature, the team reviewed models of evaluation relevant to studies of public services to identify those that had been successfully applied, and to evaluate those that were the best fit with the objectives of this study. The following models were evaluated:

- Randomised controlled trials (RCTs)
- Impact evaluations (service users)
- Action and evaluation research
- Cost benefit analysis (CBA) including rate of return analysis (RRA).

Though all these models were found to have the potential to deliver valuable insights into the impact of NCSE's frontline services on schools, pupils with SEN and parent/carers, a multi-method impact evaluation focused on service-user experiences and perspectives emerged as the best fit in the current context.

About the UoD Consortium

The UoD consortium consisted of three organisations with expert standing and track record in the field of research related to policy and practice for SEN, and inclusive education: The UoD, UK, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick, Ireland, IFF Research Ltd., London, UK.

Methodological approach

A review of the policy and practice context for the NCSE's frontline services was used to explore RQ1. To collect primary data, a rigorous mixed, multi-method approach was used to investigate RQs 2, 3 and 4. These methods and their samples were as follows:

An **online survey** achieving responses from 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff, which was co-produced with the NCSE and cognitively tested to ensure its effectiveness. The survey was online and was designed to take less than fifteen minutes to complete. This was to reduce respondent burden and maximise completion rates. Descriptive and statistical analysis was applied to the data.

In-depth interviews with 24 services users (12 parents/carers, 12 members of school staff) and nine NCSE service deliverers/associates). Interviews were an hour in length and were robustly piloted before use. The sample of participants was deliberately selected to be as diverse as possible including types of school, region and overall sentiment (positive, negative, mixed) towards the NCSE and/or its frontline services. Thematic analysis was applied to this qualitative data.

In-depth case studies of nine schools and nine children and young people (CYP) within those schools and their parents. In total, the case studies engaged the following participants: seven SNAs, two teachers with SEN coordinator roles, two SETs, 11 class teachers and five principals. Ethnographic mapping was used with CYP because of its particular value as an inclusive, accessible elicitation tool (Robinson *et al.*, 2024), and teacher-researchers (TRs) were recruited as co-researchers to implement the case studies following a period of professional development provided by researchers at MIC. Methods were piloted by TRs in their own school prior to implementation. Thematic analysis was applied to this qualitative data.

The research was commissioned in September 2022. Data collection spanned April 2023 to October 2023. It is important to note that the evaluation was active prior to the expansion of the NCSE's staffing. It is also important to be aware that participants' perceptions may be influenced by their experiences of a stretched NCSE workforce. The study engaged almost 1,400 participants (n=1,377). Survey data was analysed using descriptive and statistical methods. Qualitative data was analysed systematically using a thematic analysis approach. This resulted in the identification of four major themes and 10 subthemes. The research report has been structured thematically to reflect these findings, with relevant survey findings integrated into this account. Thereafter, findings and conclusions were drawn and reported under each of the four RQs. Figure 1 summarises the research design.

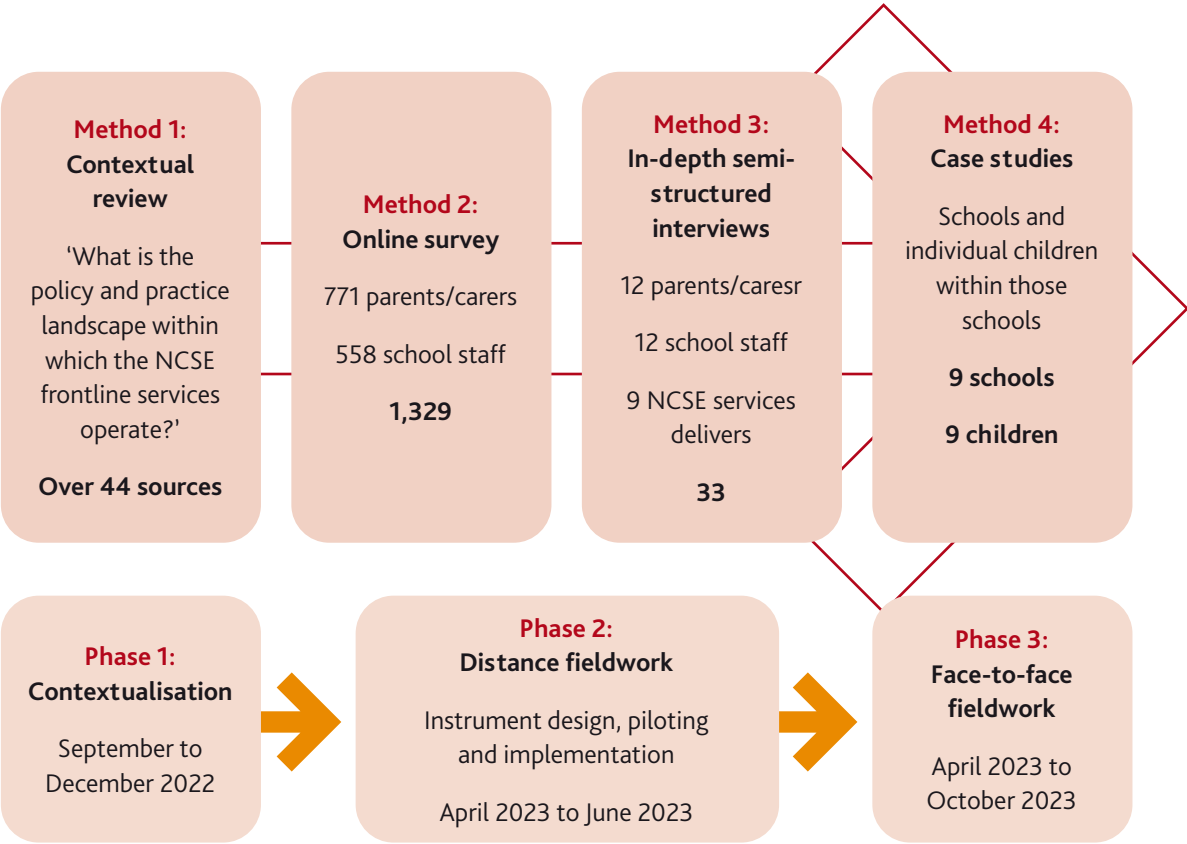
Children First and ethics

The research design prioritised children's safety and wellbeing. Researchers complied with the Children First Act (Government of Ireland, 2015) and adopted the principles of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA, 2011). This was to ensure that all personnel were aware of the key principles:

- to be aware of and recognise signs of child abuse and neglect.
- to know the designated person in a setting so that if there were a disclosure or if concerns arose, these could be referred to the designated person quickly.
- To operate with the utmost respect for children's voices in the development and enactment of data capture involving them, including processes of consent that would secure permission from parents/carers and obtain students' consent and/or assent in accessible ways (for example by asking, "Is it still okay for me to ask you some questions?" and by using assent methods appropriate for the age and communication preferences of children, such as reading gestures and engagement as signs of willingness to continue).

The research enacted ethical principles such as voluntary informed consent, protection of participants, secure data management and participant debriefing. The study design, instrumentation and consent processes were reviewed and approved by the UoD Ethics Committee for the College of Arts, Humanities and Education. Details of the approval record from the ethics committee are as follows: Project ID: PSL2122-0384; Approval Record: ETH22232356.

Figure 1: Research design



Introduction to the findings

The following offers an introduction to the findings, includes clarification on the magnitude descriptors used, and outlines the thematic structure developed through analysis of the data.

Magnitude descriptors

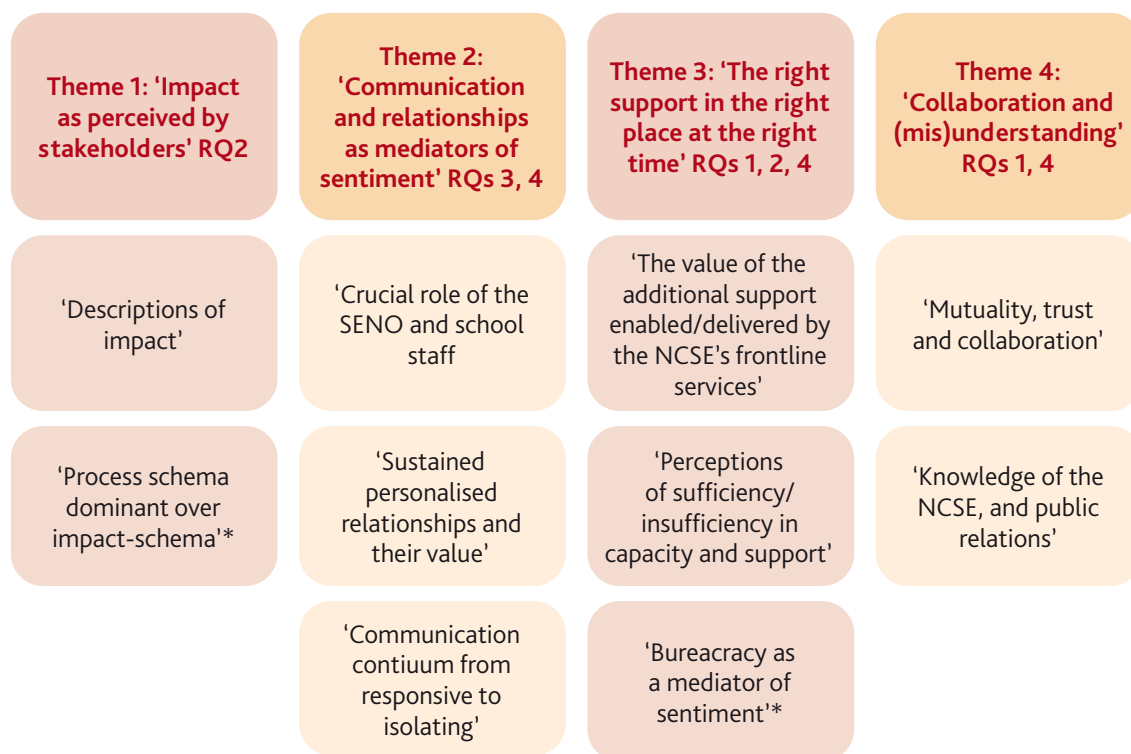
Before reporting on the findings, it is important to clarify the meaning of the magnitude descriptors used throughout. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of magnitude descriptors used in findings

Term	Percentage of a sample	Example (n) in qualitative data
All	100%	All interviews in the sample
Most	76% to 99%	If 12 interviewees, n=9
Majority	51% to 75%	If 12 interviewees, n=7 or 8 ('many' is also used)
Some	25% to 50%	If 12 interviewees, n=4,5,6
A minority	Less than 25%.	If 12 interviewees, n=3 ('a few' is also used)
Very few	1 or 2 respondents/participants only	

Themes produced from the analysis of the qualitative data

A process of rigorous and cross-checked thematic analysis that was first inductive and then deductive (meaning the development and application of a common coding frame) was applied to the qualitative data (interviews and case studies). This resulted in the identification of four themes each with several subthemes. Figure 2 provides a graphic of themes produced from the data analysis; where a theme or subtheme is identified as a 'phenomenon of interest', its text is italicised to indicate that it was derived from a process of latent analysis and is considered relevant to understanding the impact of NCSE frontline services within the lived experience of service users.

Figure 2: Summary of thematic structure: Major themes and subthemes

(*Arising from latent analysis)

Main findings

The main findings are reported under each of the four RQs.

RQ1: Key findings on the policy and practice landscape

The *contextual review* resulted in the following findings about the context for the services:

- Policy development for SEN and inclusion in Ireland had evolved significantly over time. It identified three distinct phases: the era of neglect and denial, the era of the special school and the phase of integration and inclusion.² Since the 1990s, there had been a shift towards a more inclusive approach, driven by international declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)³ and the Salamanca Statement,⁴ which advocated for inclusive education and the creation of inclusive schools. The Special Education Review Committee's report had also been fundamental in shaping a more inclusive education system in Ireland.
- The NCSE played a crucial role in this framework by delivering frontline services in accordance with the 2004 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, which aimed to provide resources and services tailored to the needs of students with SEN. Although some provisions of the EPSEN Act remained unimplemented, its core intention was to ensure appropriate education for all children with SEN. At that time, the Act was under review to address implementation challenges, incorporate stakeholder feedback and enhance inclusive practices.
- With the rising demand for SEN services and accommodations, the operational load of the NCSE had become larger and more complex, without a corresponding increase in workforce capacity.⁵ There were growing perceptions among schools and parents/carers of insufficient resources to support students with SEN. The evaluation had been commissioned to gain insights from service users regarding the quality and impact of NCSE services, their strengths, and potential areas for improvement.
- Overall, this analysis highlighted the NCSE's commitment to working within an evolving policy and practice context, necessitating continuous development through consultation, collaboration and public scrutiny. It underscored the NCSE's dedication to transparency and accountability, focusing on building public trust by prioritising the experiences of service users, including CYP with SEN.

2 D. Swan, (2000). From exclusion to inclusion. *Frontline*, 44, p. 23.

3 United Nations – UN. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Treaty Series, 1577, p. 3. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>. Accessed 3/7/20.

4 United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. UNESCO: Paris.

5 J. Kearney (2023, November 9th). A World class inclusive education system: NCSE's expansion and our vision for 2026. *The NCSE Annual Research Conference 2023*, Dublin,. Available at: <https://youtu.be/dJpzfd4Pduw>. Accessed 21/12/2023.

The findings reported below focus on the policy and practice context as perceived by participants in the evaluation.

Positive perceptions of the value of NCSE support and resources but with some limitations

While school staff and parents/carers generally value the support provided by NCSE frontline services, there are concerns about the sufficiency and effectiveness of the support in some areas.

- School staff and parents/carers placed high value on the support and resources they were receiving through NCSE frontline services. In the online survey, a majority of school staff (60 per cent) perceived NCSE support as valuable overall, with some (27 per cent) describing it as very valuable and others (37 per cent) as not valuable. However, most school staff (83 per cent) described the VTS as valuable. TPL (79 per cent) and working with the NCSE in research or consultation (76 per cent) was also identified as valuable. A majority perceived the NCSE advisory service as valuable (65 per cent) and applications for additional equipment valuable (65 per cent).
- For school staff, this was also true for the support that NCSE frontline services provided for parents/carers, and the implementation of SNA and SET support in school (61 per cent). The service perceived less positively in terms of value by school staff was the allocation and review of staffing support. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer survey the VTS was praised by many respondents (survey).
- Similarly, a majority of school staff perceived the advice and support provided by NCSE frontline services to be relevant, with 19 per cent describing it as 'very relevant', and 41 per cent as 'fairly relevant', though 35 per cent responded more negatively, with a minority (8 per cent) describing the advice and support as 'not at all relevant'.
- In the online survey, around half of school staff identified the NCSE website as 'valuable' (48 per cent).
- In terms of satisfaction with the support and services that NCSE offers, only 8 per cent were 'very satisfied' and 30 per cent were 'fairly satisfied', whereas 32 per cent were 'not very satisfied' and 29 per cent were 'not at all satisfied'.
- Where service users were less positive, it was often because they perceived that they did not receive enough support, or at least enough support to make a difference.

Challenges in resource availability, capacity, and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

The findings highlight service users' perceptions of issues with resource shortages, capacity limitations, and the adequacy of training programmes. While many participants value NCSE's TPL services, the need to personalise and contextualise training programmes to schools was raised as an area for future focus.

- Except for SET allocations, most participants perceived insufficiencies in the resources and capacity of the system to provide the level of support needed by students, families and school communities. For example, parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff were aware of the challenges of maintaining enough specialist staff, therapists, SNAs and SENOs, and they knew that this was a challenge across sectors, including the Health Service Executive (HSE), and that the teacher recruitment crisis was adding further challenges.
- During in-depth interviews and case studies, school staff noted insufficiencies in places available on TPL programmes and in resources available to support staff release. Additionally, the survey revealed mixed opinions about the TPL portfolio. While most participants found TPL valuable, a significant portion (43%) felt it did not meet their training needs effectively, often citing funding challenges or a mismatch with their specific requirements. Free-text comments expressed concerns about the expertise of TPL deliverers. The case studies highlighted the appreciation for additional supports provided by the NCSE, particularly through TPL, SENOs and published guides.

Complex, onerous and energy-sapping application processes (bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment)

The findings demonstrated that the application processes for additional resources are often seen as overly complicated and opaque, leading to frustration among parents and school staff. Delays and repeated steps in the application process contribute to negative perceptions of the NCSE's efficiency, as does slow decision-making in, for example, setting up special classes.

- Across the data set, participants reported that processes of application for additional resources were complex and onerous. Some participants also described them as opaque. Some parent/carers explained that it had taken much time to find a school that would meet their child's needs, and also had sufficient places to admit them.
- In the survey's free-text responses, parents/carers described long delays during the application process, and repeated, complex steps that frustrated them. As an indication of this more broadly, while some school staff perceived the NCSE easy to work with (38 per cent, survey), a majority (59 per cent) described it as not easy, emphasising issues with transparency and the cumbersome nature of certain processes, particularly exceptional reviews. The evaluation found that participants' experience of bureaucracy mediated their positive or negative sentiments towards the NCSE and its frontline services,

Positive relationships with NCSE frontline staff help alleviate process challenge

Good relationships with NCSE staff are noted to mitigate the negative impact of these challenges, and bureaucracy mediates participants' sentiments towards the NCSE and its services, including the degree to which service users trust decision-making in the service (for example, exceptional reviews), feel adequately supported or believe that service staff are committed to serve them well.

- Where participants had good relationships with NCSE staff, they were more resilient to these effects and were less negative about the pressures created by application processes.

Each of these topics aligns with different aspects of the policy and practice landscape in which the NCSE frontline services operate, from perceptions of their value to the practical challenges faced by those relying on their services.

Parental awareness of the NCSE and its remit

Generally, parent/carers had little broad awareness of the NCSE. This issue also arose in the findings related to RQ3. Many parents/carers had low awareness of NCSE as an organisation and 47 per cent had not heard of it at all

Summary of findings for RQ1

In summary, the findings indicate that the landscape for NCSE frontline services has been changing. The significant rise in demand for SEN services can be interpreted as an indication of policy success and implementation. However, the causes and consequences of this increase in demand are debated. For the NCSE, this surge has resulted in increasing pressure on its frontline services. The increases in funding provided by the Government of Ireland, along with the workforce transformation project *Vision 2026*, are observed as responses to this context. Stakeholders who participated in this evaluation would be likely to welcome increases in NCSE staffing and funding for SEN services. While participants perceived both sufficiencies and insufficiencies in resources, they focused more on their experiences of insufficiencies within the system. Participants were aware of the NCSE's limited workforce capacity. This view of insufficiency primarily centred on the exceptional review process, particularly regarding the allocation of additional SNAs, but it also touched upon all services, including SENOs, NCSE advisors and TPL (again with the exception of SETs).

In terms of the policy and practice context, participants expressed particular concern about the bureaucracy in the system and the negative impact it was having on their wellbeing and workloads. They noted how this bureaucracy affected the timeliness and efficiency of service delivery, especially in urgent situations. Despite these challenges, the services and supports provided by the NCSE at the frontline were valued and often highly regarded by service users. A majority considered NCSE services relevant to their needs. Considering policy intentions, this can be interpreted as affirmation of the alignment between service design and user needs, highlighting how crucial this range of services is to service users. From the participants' perspective, these are the right services delivered in the right form. However, many participants

perceived insufficiencies in staffing capacity and resources, and experienced onerous bureaucracy that they considered to be getting in the way of meeting needs and efficiency. It is also important to note that parent/carer awareness of the organisation in general was low, suggesting that their sentiments regarding the NCSE (and its frontline services) emerged primarily from their interactions with frontline staff, and the specific service(s) they were accessing.

RQ2: Key findings on the impact of the NCSE's frontline services

RQ2 was: 'What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/ carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'

The findings were as follows:

Mixed parental perceptions of NCSE support and its benefits

Parent/carer views on the effectiveness of NCSE frontline services were mixed:

- Overall, a small majority of parents/carers (51 per cent) perceived that NCSE frontline services had benefited their children significantly, though as noted under RQ1, many had low awareness of NCSE as an organisation (47 per cent had not heard of it) and so many were reporting on their experience of specific services provided by the agency. A notable percentage of parents/carers (35 per cent) reported minimal or negative impacts from NCSE interventions.
- When referring to the benefit of specific frontline services, a majority of parents perceived significant positive impacts from the VTS (81 per cent) and the review/ allocation of school transport (74 per cent), additional resources (63 per cent), SNAs, HT (60 per cent) and SETs.
- There were several common themes in the survey's free-text responses about impacts. These included: access to education, educational progress, social benefits, feelings of security for the child and the parent/carer, and improved wellbeing. These are reported in more detail below.

Significant benefits to access to education through NCSE services

NCSE services were viewed as critical in improving access to education for many children:

- Most parents/carers reported that NCSE services led to improved access to education for their children, especially the VTS (81 per cent), SENO support in school placements (65 per cent), HT (62 per cent), and school transport (58 per cent). Free-text comments highlighted the importance of these services in ensuring access to schooling. This was echoed in the qualitative data.

Positive impact on students' social inclusion and wellbeing, and family wellbeing

Parents/carers linked NCSE services to improvements in social inclusion and wellbeing for their children.

- Parents/carers identified the VTS, SENO support and allocation of SNAs as services that contributed to social benefits and inclusion. In contrast, few (7 per cent) saw HT as supporting inclusion, possibly because it occurs outside peer and community environments.
- In terms of improved wellbeing, the majority of parents/carers cited SENO support (53 per cent), VTS (46 per cent) and HT (41 per cent) as impactful. Free-text comments indicated that once appropriate support was in place, it greatly improved the wellbeing both of the children and their families.
- In case studies, parents/carers and students acknowledged the positive impact of additional staffing on student participation, learning, inclusion and wellbeing. Students, for example, noted how SETs helped their learning. Successful transitions and increased opportunities for socialisation were also attributed to NCSE services.

The findings indicate that NCSE services, particularly through key staff like SNAs, play a crucial role in fostering students' sense of belonging, inclusion and wellbeing, even though students themselves did not directly comment on NCSE services.

- Understandably, students who participated in the case study did not comment directly on the value they placed on NCSE services, but all nine communicated a sense of belonging. Students explained how key staff, particularly SNAs, supported their feelings of being welcome and accepted. Some parents/carers reported that NCSE services improved their understanding of their child's needs and contributed to a better family life. Additionally, 21 per cent saw wellbeing benefits for other children in the family due to reduced stress levels at home.
- Case studies revealed that school staff saw positive impacts on inclusion, wellbeing and confidence when they received support from the SENO, VTS and NCSE advisory services. Specific professional learning opportunities, such as those related to ASD, behaviour and bullying, were also praised when aligned with school needs.

Limited impact from perspective of school staff

School staff had a more limited view of the impact of the NCSE's services, with a minority perceiving significant benefits to students.

- Positive perceptions of NCSE impacts were less common among school staff than parents/carers. Only 38 per cent perceived significant benefits to children, and over 70 per cent felt there was little to no impact on other children in the school or on parents/carers. However, some staff did perceive benefits to their schools' knowledge, confidence, methods and inclusive practices. Our analysis of the corpus data indicates that these perceptions are mediated by participants' experience of communication, relationships and bureaucracy, and this is further explored under RQ3.

Process dominates discussions on NCSE services

In the case of school staff and NCSE staff, discussions about NCSE services tended to focus on process issues rather than their impact on students and families.

- Interviews with both NCSE and school staff showed that participants focused more on their experiences of operational matters and processes (for example applications), and their impact on stress levels and workload, rather than the impact of a service on students and families. When prompted to provide examples of positive impacts arising from services, most participants struggled to articulate these clearly even when prompted.
- It is not clear why this is the case, but explanations include the emotional resonance of onerous applications/refusals, the challenges of capacity shortages, and the assumption that inclusive outcomes will follow almost by default once the resource itself is allocated. In this way, the receipt of the resource is conceptualised by participants to be the *priori* impact. Making this observation is not being critical of NCSE and school staff. Instead, this phenomenon is noted to be of interest. The team notes process schema being dominant over impact schema as a phenomenon of interest because it may indicate the dominance of a process culture. It may be that an impact culture would work better to catalyse inclusive practice, as it would position the NCSE's role in a continuum of support that runs from its services to schools, students and families, and then back again. This idea is further explored in Section 8 (Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'). The team also highlight this phenomenon, which may explain why the findings of the parents/carers survey show more positive perceptions of the benefit of the NCSE's frontline services when compared to the findings of the survey of school staff. There seems to be a difference in the way that parents/carers and school staff perceive/experience impact.

Summary of findings for RQ2

In summary, the findings show that perceptions among parents and carers regarding the impact of different frontline services is varied. A majority acknowledged positive impacts on educational access, social benefits, inclusion and wellbeing for their children. Most participants also viewed the impact of SENOs positively in this regard. NCSE frontline services were considered crucial for these impacts. While school staff generally reported fewer positive perceptions of the NCSE's frontline services compared to parents and carers, key findings revealed nuances. In the survey, some school staff acknowledged benefits such as improved knowledge among staff (40 per cent), increased school confidence (34 per cent), enhanced methods and processes (36 per cent) and inclusive practices (32 per cent), although none of these represented a majority of respondents. Notably, over 70 per cent perceived little, no or detrimental impact on other children and parents and carers. In contrast, case studies provided positive accounts, particularly regarding successful applications for additional staffing through SENO support, which led to improved inclusion and wellbeing. Most importantly, all nine students who participated in the participative research expressed feelings of belonging, participation and progress in their schools. Although it cannot be assumed that these positive experiences are universal, the case studies provide insight into what can happen for students when the interaction of school practices and

NCSE support function effectively. It is noteworthy that positive evaluations of the quality and impact of a frontline service were observed to arise when participants received the requested resources in a timely manner. This relationship between sentiment and allocation is important to acknowledge, but it may prove challenging to address. Nonetheless, the issue of public relations (discussed later) is relevant in this context.

RQ3: Key findings on relationships, communication and collaboration

RQ3 was: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'

Data relevant to answering this RQ was contained in Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment' and Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'.

The crucial role of SENOs in shaping perceptions and service users' perceptions

Parents, school staff and NCSE staff see SENOs as the key representatives of NCSE, that is, the face of the NCSE. Their effectiveness was observed to influence participants' perceptions of the service and system.

- Parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff perceive the services provided by SENOs as crucial, as they are seen as the face of NCSE. Their interactions influence perceptions of NCSE and the system.
- The availability, responsiveness and competence of SENOs were seen as critical for securing support. Participants wanted consistent quality across the service and for sufficient SENOs to be available to all schools.
- Some participants expressed concerns about the decreasing visibility of SENOs in schools, which affected their perception of NCSE, highlighting the need for more presence and engagement.

The importance of personalised relationships and sustained (and/or face-to-face) contact

Personal relationships and regular, personalised interactions between NCSE staff and service users build trust and lead to more positive perceptions of the NCSE.

- Participants valued personalised relationships that developed over time. The NCSE advisory service and VTS were seen positively due to their sustained, willing relationships with schools.
- Trusting and supportive relationships with NCSE staff helped service users to stay positive, even when facing challenges like complex applications or denials, thus showing that relationships and communication strongly impact sentiment towards the NCSE.
- Face-to-face encounters were highly valued, as they helped services to be more tailored to schools' needs, fostering more positive perceptions of the NCSE.

Challenges in communication and visibility

Parents and school staff reported issues with communication and a lack of visibility of NCSE frontline services, which negatively impacted their perceptions of the organisation.

- Communication issues were commonly reported, with slow responses and less face-to-face contact leading to negative perceptions. Competent and responsive staff helped, but the inconsistency in communication frustrated service users.
- Parents/carers often felt isolated and unsupported due to poor communication, with many struggling to navigate the system. They wanted better communication with the NCSE, more transparency and more involvement.
- School staff also experienced communication difficulties, particularly when they worked with less-effective NCSE staff. This inconsistency impacted their sense of support and the perceived impact of NCSE services.

Low awareness and confusion about the NCSE and its services

Many stakeholders had limited knowledge of NCSE services, with reduced visibility leading to misconceptions and negative perceptions.

- As noted under RQ1, around 64 per cent of parents/carers had limited or no knowledge of the NCSE, with only 34 per cent reporting some awareness of it. Free-text comments indicated that evaluations of NCSE were based on experiences with specific services rather than a full understanding of the organisation.
- School staff reported a lack of familiarity with NCSE services unless they had direct interactions with NCSE frontline staff. Decreased visibility of NCSE staff in schools contributed to misconceptions and negative perceptions.
- Participants were unclear about the responsibilities and roles of different NCSE services and how they collaborated with other agencies like the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). This confusion often led to frustration and a 'pillar-to-post' experience for parents/carers and school staff.
- Participants suggested the following solutions for the NCSE: first, to engage in a public relations and communication programme that would clarify the roles and responsibilities of NCSE frontline services and explain its scope and remit; second, to increase the visibility of NCSE frontline services in schools.

The need for better collaboration, transparency and trust

Among service users was a desire for greater collaboration and trust between NCSE, schools and parents, with participants expressing concerns about an adversarial system:

- Some school leaders expressed concern about NCSE's lack of trust in their judgement and desired more collaboration. They imagined a less adversarial system with more partnership between frontline services, schools and parents.
- Participants were unaware of how NCSE services collaborate with other agencies, indicating that these relationships were not visible or concrete to them.
- Parents/carers wanted a more collaborative relationship where they were involved in the planning, discussion and decision-making around their child's support.

Summary of findings for RQ3

In summary, the findings suggest that perceptions of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services vary among stakeholders. SENOs are perceived as crucial by parents/carers and school staff. As the 'face of the NCSE', they mediate perceptions of the organisation in terms of its culture, service quality and decision-making. From the perspective of participants, the availability, responsiveness and competence of SENOs significantly impact the success of garnering additional support. Personalised relationships and sustained interactions with NCSE advisory staff and the VTS are highly regarded, positively influencing perceptions. The combined data illustrates how much priority service users place on positive relationships and competence. However, a perceived decrease in the visibility of NCSE staff in schools has led to reduced positive perceptions and knowledge of the organisation's functions. Stakeholders emphasise the importance of trusting relationships and face-to-face encounters, while highlighting the need for improved communication and relationships within NCSE frontline services. Many parents and carers, as well as school staff, express feelings of isolation and frustration due to poor communication and confusion about what they should expect from the organisation. Some participants suggest that the solutions for the NCSE include the following: first, to engage in a public relations and communication programme that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of NCSE frontline services and explains its scope and remit; second, to increase the visibility of NCSE frontline services in schools.

RQ4: Key findings on what is working well and what needs to improve

RQ4 was: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

For this question, conclusions are drawn from the corpus data.

What is working well?

From the perspective of participants, the frontline services provided by the NCSE are the right services (in terms of their shape and purpose) and are valued and even prized. However, there are not enough of them (that is, there are insufficiencies in size and capacity), and the quality of support is not always consistent.

School staff and parents/carers place high value on the support and resources they receive through NCSE's frontline services. In the online survey, a majority of school staff (60 per cent) perceived NCSE support as valuable overall, with some (27 per cent) describing it as very valuable. However, it is important to note that others (37 per cent) did not view it as valuable. Where respondents were less positive, it was often because they felt they did not receive enough support, or at least not enough to make a difference. Most school staff who had interacted with a specific frontline service described the VTS (83 per cent), TPL (79 per cent) and working with the NCSE in research or consultation (76 per cent) as valuable. A majority also perceived the NCSE advisory service (65 per cent) and applications for additional equipment (65 per cent) as valuable. For school staff, this was also true regarding the support that NCSE frontline services provided for parents/carers and the implementation of SNA and SET support in schools (61 per cent). The service identified by school staff as the least valuable was the allocation and review (appeals) of staffing support. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer surveys, the VTS was praised by many respondents and the SENO was recognised as crucial to children's inclusion.

The SENO role was positively impactful when working well, and participants viewed these role-holders as the face of the NCSE. Parents, carers, school staff and NCSE staff perceived the services provided by (SENOs) as crucial to the development of inclusion for students with SEN. Their interactions with service users were observed to mediate positive or negative perceptions of the service and the NCSE. When the SENO was perceived by service users to be effective in building relationships, as well as empathic, responsive and relationally effective, perceptions of the NCSE were positive, even in cases where support had not been allocated following an application. It was clear that some participants received outstanding support from their SENO, and there were indications of expertise in the SENO workforce that participants valued very highly. However, participants wanted this quality to be consistent across the service and for sufficient SENOs to be available to support all schools.

A majority of parents/carers reported positive impacts on access to education, wellbeing and progress for their children. Often, support from frontline staff brings reassurance and positive change to families. A majority of parents/carers also reported that NCSE frontline services led to improved access to education for their child. For example, 81 per cent identified the VTS as impactful in this respect, and 56 per cent perceived SENO support as relevant to access. Regarding improved wellbeing for their child, most parents/carers reported that SENO support in reviewing and allocating SNA support had an impact (53 per cent).

Some services were highly regarded by service users. In various ways, the VTS, NCSE advisory service, SENO role, TPL, additional resources (such as technology), school transport, HT, website resources, NCSE guides and research were all identified as valuable, relevant and impactful services. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer survey, the VTS was praised by many respondents. This implies that participants perceive benefits from a range of NCSE services. When reporting significant benefits, a majority of parents/carers noted this was the case for the VTS (71 per cent), with relatively high ratings also for reviewing and allocating SNAs (48 per cent), school transport (69 per cent) and HT (55 per cent). This indicates the difference that NCSE frontline services can make for families when they are working well. Some families and school communities have worked with NCSE staff who are highly skilled and effective, not just in terms of knowledge but also in relationship-building. This indicates a skill base that positively impacts families and schools. However, stakeholders recognise that insufficiencies in capacity (such as staff shortages and high caseloads) affect access to this expertise, and that there are variabilities in the competence of role holders. The VTS is particularly impactful and is the most highly valued of all services. Our findings suggest that this is because their relationships with service users are individualised, contextualised and sustained over a relatively long period. Where relationships and communication work well, they positively influence perceptions of the value and impact of services. However, these positive experiences are not always consistent, and participants' experiences of communication vary widely. When they experience responsive communication, their sentiment towards the frontline service, and the NCSE more generally, is positive, and the data contains clear examples of this having occurred. Data from our interviews with NCSE staff contain evidence of their commitment, awareness of areas for improvement, and desire to enhance quality and impact. NCSE staff are open to reflection and wish to develop their services to be more impactful, fostering better cross-sectoral working and collaboration as part of this process.

Most importantly, all the students engaged in this evaluation communicated positive experiences of inclusion and participation from their own perspectives, explaining how good relationships, SNAs and additional equipment have been crucial to their positive experiences at school. In the case studies, it was observed how students benefit when the support provided by schools (such as through universal design for learning) interacts with support from the NCSE, ensuring that students with SEN are included. Understandably, although students who participated in the case studies did not comment directly on the value they placed on NCSE services, all nine communicated a sense of belonging. They explained how key staff, particularly SNAs, supported their inclusion, wellbeing and participation. In case studies, additional staffing or support (such as equipment and transport) were identified by parents/carers and students as positively impactful on their access to education, participation, learning and wellbeing. However, data from the case studies provided insights on how interactions between families, schools and NCSE frontline services can be improved for greater fluidity in the continuum of provision and hence a potentially greater impact on students.

What improvements could be made?

The evaluation has identified the following areas as potential priorities for continuous improvement in the context of *Vision 26*.

Increasing the capacity of frontline services: there is a need to ensure sufficient and responsive support for families and school communities. This phenomenon was prevalent in the data, with all participant groups recognising that insufficiencies impacted effectiveness. Apart from SET allocations, most participants perceived a lack of resources and capacity in the system to provide the necessary level of support for students, families and school communities. For example, parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff were aware of the challenges in maintaining enough specialist staff and SENOs, recognising this challenge across sectors, including the HSE. They acknowledged that the teacher recruitment crisis further exacerbated these challenges. Insufficiencies in available places on TPL programmes and resources to support staff release were noted by school staff during in-depth interviews and case studies. Additionally, the survey revealed mixed opinions about the TPL portfolio. While most participants found TPL valuable, a significant portion (43 per cent) reported that it did not effectively meet their training needs, often citing funding challenges or a mismatch with their specific requirements. Free-text comments expressed concerns about the expertise of TPL providers. The case studies highlighted appreciation for additional supports provided by the NCSE, particularly through TPL, SENOs and published guides. In interviews with NCSE and school staff, as well as in the survey free-text comments, participants expressed awareness of resource constraints that impact the system's capacity to deliver timely responses to applications and inquiries. A majority of participants (68 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'the NCSE does not have enough resources to meet the demands of the current system'. They viewed this as a systemic issue and not one that NCSE could solve in isolation. However, with the NCSE's transformation programme Vision 26 and increased staffing enabled by rising government funding, there is an opportunity for these issues to be addressed, particularly if services are delivered responsively and can build positive relationships with service users.

Ensuring sufficient staff capacity for relationship-building: training in relationship-building and communication would improve service provision in the context of greater staff capacity. These 'soft' skills (including empathy, non-judgemental approaches and active listening) influence how service users perceive the quality and impact of a service. Some participants had negative interactions with NCSE frontline services, feeling judged, dismissed, not listened to, or sent 'from pillar to post', and this was seen to impact on participants' focus on impact, as well as on the effective meeting of needs.

Improving communication and relationships: clear, consistent, responsive, and effective communication is an area in which improvements are needed. When NCSE and school staff were asked about communication and relationships with stakeholders, they identified a need for better communication strategies across the system. In the survey of parents/carers, many respondents reported feelings of isolation and being left in the dark due to poor communication. For instance, parents/carers felt they had to navigate the system of support for SEN on their own because their claims about their child's needs were dismissed or their communications with the NCSE went unanswered. The findings illustrated the critical role of the SENO and the importance

of sensitive and supportive communication between SENOs and families. Parents/carers desired better communication with the NCSE and more transparency. Across the data, relationships and communication emerged as critical to service-user perceptions of the NCSE. When relationships with NCSE staff delivering frontline services were trusting and mutually supportive, service users had positive sentiments towards the service and the organisation. They were also more resilient to the effects of cumbersome application processes and having an application refused. This indicates that communication and relationships mediate sentiments about the NCSE, and that responsive, positive interactions with frontline staff impacts service users' overall perceptions.

Developing an impact-focused culture: the complex processes that enable the distribution of support for SEN explains why NCSE and school staff were more focused on operational matters than impact. It will be important to shift discussion and discourse in the direction of impact so that a shared and systemic focus on inclusive outcomes for students is more centralised. This could catalyse a culture of collaboration between the NCSE, its frontline services, wider services (such as the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) and Children Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), schools and parents/carers.

Reviewing the TPL portfolio: some participants suggested the TPL portfolio needs to be reviewed to ensure it is age-specific, meets the training needs of schools, includes more bespoke programmes, and is accessible to schools that may not be able to release staff for learning events. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with TPL training and a desire for training options to be diversified. In participants' view, the professional development that was most effective was that which took place in school and related to specific children and contexts.

Streamlining processes for service users: some participants expressed a desire for NCSE processes to be streamlined for better access to supports and timely decisions on applications. Feedback indicated that processes for accessing services can be complex and cumbersome. Additionally, clarity is needed about what resources exist, what services are available and how they can be accessed. The evaluation has found that bureaucracy mediates sentiment, that is bad experiences of process impact on participants' view of the NCSE more generally.

Focusing on public relations and awareness raising: awareness-raising initiatives regarding the NCSE's role and services could enhance the quality and impact of frontline services. While some participants reported that they knew how to access services, many others felt unsure. The case studies revealed instances where school staff were unaware of specific NCSE services that could have benefited their students. Given that awareness and understanding of the NCSE as an organisation is relatively low, particularly among parents/carers, and that there is confusion among school staff about the remit and reach of specific services, it is important to raise awareness.

Overall conclusion

To conclude, this independent evaluation finds that the NCSE's frontline services are highly valued by service users, with examples of both positive impact and positive experiences across all types of service. It is clear that NCSE frontline services, as currently conceived, are well aligned with the needs of service users and Ireland's progress towards establishing a world-class, inclusive education system. However, this is only true when these services are functioning effectively, personalised, responsive and adequately resourced. SENOs are recognised as the face of the NCSE, and their role is viewed as essential. Service users who engage with NCSE staff demonstrating high levels of expertise find this highly valuable and impactful.

All students involved in the evaluation felt they were experiencing inclusive education from their own perspective. While this cannot be generalised to all students with SEN in Ireland, it is possible to see what can be achieved when schools and NCSE frontline services collaborate, even in the face of capacity challenges. However, experiences and perceptions varied greatly across the dataset, with reports of low responsiveness, poor communication and strained relationships raising significant concerns.

Continuous improvement to NCSE frontline services, and to public perceptions of these services and the NCSE, will be vital to achieving a world-class, inclusive education system in Ireland. *Vision 26* provides a framework through which these improvements can be driven. By prioritising increased visibility, responsiveness, communication, personalisation and a more collaborative culture within the NCSE and its frontline services, service-user perceptions and experiences are likely to improve significantly.

Finally, it has emerged that the NCSE's frontline services were the right shape for Ireland, but their size and the consistency of their quality needs attention. At the same time, there is an opportunity to evolve a more impact-focused model of service, planning and collaboration so that all stakeholders can work together to achieve a shared vision for inclusion and a shared conceptualisation of the outcomes they are pursuing together.

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1. Introduction

This section summarises the study's context, research questions (RQs), sample and methodology. Robust approaches to contextualisation, data collection and data analysis were used for the study and a full account of these is provided in Section 2 (Context) and Section 3 (Methodology) of this report.

Context

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) commissioned the University of Derby (UoD) Consortium to complete an independent evaluation of the quality and impact of its frontline services from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders included parents/carers, school staff, NCSE staff, and students with special educational needs (SEN). This was at a time when the NCSE was commencing workforce expansion and developing an associated strategy termed *Vision 2026*. This transformation programme provides for a strategic workforce reform with design principles centred on service responsiveness, effectiveness and consistency. It was in a context where government funding to the NCSE was substantially increased in Budget 2023 to enable growth in the NCSE's frontline workforce at a time of rising demand for its services. This evaluation was commissioned by the NCSE to inform continuous improvement in the context of *Vision 2026*.

To contextualise this further, there has been a rapid growth in SEN activity over the past 12 years, including an 81 per cent rise in Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) a 44 per cent increase in special education teachers (SETs) between 2010 and 2022. Investment in SEN accounts for 27 per cent of Exchequer funding for education. There has been a significant increase in special classes in mainstream schools, with a 556 per cent rise in primary school classes and a 665 per cent increase in post-primary classes between 2010 and 2022. The prevalence of ASD has risen from 1.5 per cent in 2021 to over 4 per cent in 2023, and autism classes have seen dramatic growth rates of 904 per cent and in the case of early-intervention classes, a 619 per cent rise. In the context of rising demand, the NCSE's staffing had remained static until 2022. Following the €13 million increase in government funding to the NCSE, recruitment of over 160 additional staff, including special educational needs organisers (SENOs) was initiated. Since 2022, the estimated NCSE workforce has grown from 230.5 to 426 in 2024. This included a doubling in SENO roles. The number of team managers, specialist leads, advisors and administration staff also increased, and NCSE employed Irish Sign Language (ISL) advisors for the first time. This expansion reflects the NCSE's response to growing needs, and relatedly, the Government of Ireland's commitment to developing a world-class education system in Ireland (Kearney, 2023).

It is important to clarify the focus of this evaluation by explaining what is meant by 'frontline services' in this study. Services described as frontline are those that are most visible to stakeholders in their day-to-day encounters with NCSE staff, services and processes.

In the evaluation, the services of interest were:

- SENOs
- Visiting Teacher Service (VTS)
- NCSE in-school advisory service
- SET and special needs assistant (SNA) allocations and exceptional reviews
- applications and allocations for transport, equipment and HT
- teacher professional learning (TPL)
- NCSE website (including the School Support Portal)
- NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers and schools.

Four core RQs were posed by this evaluation as follows:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

The purpose of the evaluation is not to compare one frontline service with another. That is, the evaluation is not about comparing quality, value or impact. Nor is it to identify which are performing better or worse, but to gain insight into service users' perceptions of NCSE frontline services as a comprehensive support package. Furthermore, comparisons are not appropriate because each service is designed to meet specific needs and operates within different contexts, making direct comparison misleading. Additionally, focusing on comparison could overlook the broader goal of understanding how these services collectively contribute to overall outcomes for users.

At the inception of the project, the research team was commissioned to address the following RQ as their first task: *What evaluation methodology is the best fit for a commission centred on evaluating the NCCE's frontline services?* Following a review of national and international literature, the team reviewed models of evaluation relevant to studies of public services to identify those that had been successfully applied, and to evaluate those that were the best fit with the purposes of this study. The following models were evaluated:

- Randomised controlled trials (RCTs)
- Impact evaluations (service users)
- Action and evaluation research
- Cost benefit analysis (CBA) including rate of return analysis (RRA).

Though all these models were found to have the potential to deliver valuable insights into the impact of NCSE's frontline services on schools, pupils with SEN and parent/carers, a multi-method impact evaluation focused on service-user experiences and perspectives emerged as the best fit in the current context. Some key reasons for this were:

- RCTs are difficult to form when the interventions to be evaluated are multi-faceted and apply to heterogeneous populations (as is the case for NCSE frontline services, and the population of pupils identified as having SEN).
- A CBA (or IRR) study is not feasible given the timeline and funding allocated to this evaluation and cannot capture accounts of the lived experiences of service users.
- Action and evaluation research is not a good fit as the evaluation is a national evaluation and will not unfold in specific regions or localities.
- The NCSE context allows systematic analysis of the relationship between services and outcomes as these are perceived by service users. This is supported by the following conditions:
 - NCSE statements of strategy provide clear accounts of intended outcomes.
 - The EPSEN Act 2004 provides broad, rights-based intentions.
 - A complex range of services combine to deliver outcomes, making this kind of impact evaluation a good fit.
 - An impact study focused on service users' perspectives gathers feedback from actual users and provides direct insights into their experiences, needs and satisfaction levels. This helps to identify gaps in service provision and areas needing improvement, as well as strengths. Tailoring of services around the needs of users can also result in more effective and relevant approaches to delivery.
 - An impact study focused on service users' perspectives is a gesture of transparency and accountability. In the context of the NCCE's consultative approach, this evaluation can contribute to the continuous building of public trust.

About the UoD Consortium

The UoD Consortium consisted of three organisations with expert standing and track record in the field of research related to policy and practice for SEN and inclusive education:

- The UoD, UK
- MIC, Limerick, Ireland
- IFF Research Ltd., London, UK.

Methodological approach

A review of the policy and practice context for the NCSE's frontline services was used to explore RQ1 and outcomes are presented in Section 2 of this report. To collect primary data, a rigorous mixed, multi-method approach was used to investigate RQs 2, 3 and 4. These methods and their samples were as follows:

- A survey achieving responses from 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff that was co-produced with the NCSE and cognitively tested to ensure its effectiveness. The survey was online and was designed to take less than 15 minutes to complete. This was intended to reduce respondent burden and maximise completion rates.
- In-depth interviews with 24 services users (12 parents/carers, 12 members of school staff) and nine NCSE service deliverers). Interviews were an hour in length and were robustly piloted before use. The sample of participants was deliberately selected to represent as diverse a sample as possible including types of school, region and overall sentiment towards the NCSE and/or its frontline services.
- In-depth case studies of nine schools and nine children and young people (CYP) within those schools, and their parents. In total, the case studies engaged the following participants: seven SNAs, two teachers with SEN coordinator roles, two SETs, 11 class teachers and five principals. Ethnographic mapping was used with CYP because of its particular value as an inclusive, accessible elicitation tool (Robinson *et al.*, 2024), and teacher-researchers (TRs) were recruited as co-researchers to implement the case studies following a period of professional development provided by researchers at MIC. Methods were piloted by TRs in their own school prior to implementation.

The research was commissioned in September 2022. Data collection spanned April 2023 to October 2023. It is important to note that the evaluation was active prior to the expansion of the NCSE's staffing in the context of Budget 23 and *Vision 26*. It is also important to be aware that participants' perceptions may reflect their own experiences of the consequences of a stretched NCSE workforce.

Overall, the study engaged almost 1,400 (1,377) participants. Survey data was analysed using descriptive and statistical methods. Qualitative data was analysed systematically using a thematic analysis approach. This resulted in the identification of four major themes and 10 subthemes. The Findings section of this research report is structured around these themes and subthemes. Thereafter, findings are summarised under each of the four RQs in the Conclusion.

Content of the research report

This report includes a review of the context for NCSE frontline services (RQ1) in Section 2. A fuller account of the methodological approach and the study sample is provided in Section 3. Findings are presented and discussed thematically and include descriptive and statistical data, quotations, data extracts, vignettes and imagery. The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2: The context for NCSE frontline services (RQ1)
- Section 3: Methodological approach and sampling
- Section 4: Introduction to the findings and thematic map
- Section 5: Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders' (RQ2)
- Section 6: Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment' (RQ3, RQ4)
- Section 7: Theme 3: 'The right support at the right time in the right place' (RQ1, 2, 4)
- Section 8: Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding' (RQ1, 4)

Section 9 provides a summary of findings and draws conclusions on stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of NCSE frontline services. From these findings, conclusions on what is working well and what needs to be improved are outlined in support of the continuing improvement within the NCSE and its frontline services.

Summary

This section has provided a brief introduction to the research and has included exposition of the following key points. The four RQs were investigated using mixed, multimodal methods that included an online survey of 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff, in-depth interviews with 33 stakeholders, and in-depth case studies of nine varied schools and nine children with SENs within those schools. In total, 1,377 stakeholders participated in this study.

Fuller reporting and defence of the methodological approach are provided in 3. In the following section, an analysis of the policy and practice context for NCSE frontline services is provided to address RQ2

2. The context for NCSE frontline services

This contextual review describes the position of the NCSE within national and international policy and practice for the educational inclusion of pupils with SEN. It offers analysis of the establishment, remit and strategic goals of the NCSE, as well as the frontline services provided by the agency. The content of this section is a response to RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?' The purpose of the section is not to provide a comprehensive review of the literature, but to describe the contextual backdrop to the evaluation in an accurate and illustrative way. The review drew on over 44 sources, and search terms included 'Special educational needs Ireland', 'Inclusion in Irish education', 'NCSE special educational needs', 'Educational policies for special needs in Ireland', 'Inclusive education practices Ireland', 'Irish educational system and special needs', 'Special education services NCSE', 'Legislation for special educational needs Ireland', 'Disability and education in Ireland', 'Barriers to inclusion in Irish schools', 'Educational frameworks for inclusion in Ireland', 'Stakeholder perspectives on special education in Ireland', 'Evolving policies for special needs education Ireland', 'Best practices for inclusion in Ireland' and 'Impact of EPSEN Act on education in Ireland'. The subsection that follows provides a broad contextualisation for developing inclusive policies for inclusion.

The evolution of policies related to inclusion in Ireland

The evolution of policies for SEN in Ireland has been described as having three phases (Swan, 2000): the era of neglect (up to 1959); the era of the special school (1960 to the 1970s); and the era of integration and inclusion (the 1980s onwards). During the era of the special school, special education and general (mainstream) education developed in parallel but separately. Decisions and policymaking on special education were rarely considered in the context of general education (Kenny and Mihut, 2020), and it has been argued that this schism reflected the marginalised position that children and adults with disabilities occupied in Irish society (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). The era of integration and inclusion brought dramatic change to policy in SEN and inclusion, but there have been concerns about the rising number of special classes in mainstream schools and the way in which their rise may indicate that Ireland's era of integration and inclusion is leaning towards the former (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Banks *et al.*, 2016).

From the 1990s, policy interest began to shift from providing educational provision through special education towards a more inclusive approach that positioned special education and general education within a more unified framework (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). At this time, two international declarations were influencing Irish policy: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO, 1994). The UNCRC promoted accessibility for every child and the opportunity to develop their 'personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (United Nations, 1989, Article 29, [para 1a]), suggesting that segregation was a potential violation of the child's right to appropriate inclusive education. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) called on governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education and used the caveat phrase (our underlining) 'all children should learn together, where possible', and called on governments to proliferate inclusive schools. By enabling mainstream schools to become inclusive,

governments could reduce the number of children requiring segregated, specialist schooling. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) did not advocate for the elimination of all specialised provisions or special schools. Instead, it called on governments to continuously reform mainstream schools so that they could effectively educate an increasingly diverse population of children with disabilities. At the same time, the statement encouraged governments to view the development of special education as part of a country's overall educational, social and economic policy. Therefore, education for all children, including those with special needs, should be approached holistically, considering legislation, policies, organisation and operationalisation (Ware *et al.*, 2011). The Education Act 1998, though not known to be concerned with free education, built upon these concepts by seeking to put into effect the Irish constitutional right of all children to an education. This included children with a disability or other SEN (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). However, there have been criticisms of this legislation on the grounds that it did not go far enough and contained caveats that continued to permit exclusive practices (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007).

In 1993, the landmark Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was published (Department of Education and Science, DES, 1993). This report is often cited as the first to introduce the concept of a *continuum of provision* for students with SEN. This continuum ranged from full-time placement in a special school to placement in a special class in a mainstream school to full-time placement in an ordinary class in a mainstream school (Rix *et al.*, 2013). Shevlin and Banks (2021) have argued that, in conjunction with the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the SERC report was fundamental in driving the development of inclusive schools in Ireland. This signalled ongoing changes to Ireland's legislation, policies and practices around SEN. These changes aimed to put into action the goals outlined in international declarations that prioritise the rights of individuals with SEN. The SERC report anticipated the establishment of the NCSE, an agency that would be required to provide coordinated support for pupils with SEN across a range of educational settings (Kenny and Mihut, 2020). The NCSE was formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004, with effect from 1 October 2005. It was the EPSEN Act 2004 that defined the remit of the NCSE. Though the agency was established by order of the Minister for Education and Science in 2003, it was to be an independent statutory body with responsibility for improving the delivery of education services to persons with SEN.

It is important to acknowledge that litigation by parents of children with disabilities and SEN has played a pivotal role in shaping changes within the education sector in Ireland, often acting as a catalyst for reform. High-profile cases brought by parents have highlighted systemic inadequacies and compelled policymakers to address issues surrounding access to appropriate educational resources and support. This history of legal challenges has not only influenced the development of inclusive education policies but has also empowered parents to advocate for their children's rights, ensuring that their voices are heard in the ongoing discourse about educational equity (Murray, 2017). The EPSEN Act 2004 represents a comprehensive legislative framework that addresses the educational needs of students with SEN. The core principles of the Act are centred around inclusivity, ensuring that children with SEN have equal access to education and are integrated into mainstream schools whenever possible. The Act outlines the NCSE's responsibilities in several key areas, including providing related advice and information to stakeholders, conducting research and promoting innovation in special education, advising

on resource allocation, collaborating with relevant bodies and consulting with stakeholders. Not in the Act, but embedded in the NCSE's role, lies the task of advocating for inclusive education and facilitating training and professional development for educators involved in special needs education in specialist and mainstream settings.

The responsibilities remitted to the NCSE in the EPSEN Act 2004 reflect the NCSE's pivotal role in coordinating activities intending to support and enhance the educational experiences of children with SEN in Ireland. However, at the time of writing, EPSEN remits related to identification and assessment, individual education plans and review and evaluation were not implemented because of a major economic crisis in 2008 caused by a global recession (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Other elements of the Act not specifically related to the NCSE were also not implemented at the time, and this continues to be the case. However, in 2022, the Department of Education (DE) commenced a comprehensive review of the EPSEN Act. There are several reasons for this review, including the need to address implementation challenges and ensure the Act remains relevant to the evolving needs of students with disabilities. Additionally, the review seeks to incorporate stakeholder feedback, align with international standards, strengthen inclusive practices and evaluate resource allocation to improve educational outcomes for students with SEN in Ireland.

The influence of international policies and declarations and the concept of full inclusion

International policies and declarations synchronised with changing views about SEN in Ireland. This is evident in the Education Act 1998, which secured the constitutional right of all children, including those with a disability or other SEN, to free education. As intimated above, EPSEN (Government of Ireland, 2004) continued to give attention to the rights of children with SEN to an inclusive educational experience along a continuum of placements (MacGill Phádraig, 2007) but with a commitment to ensuring 'that the education of people with such needs shall, wherever possible take place in an inclusive environment' (Government of Ireland, 2004, p. 5). The EPSEN Act of 2004 demonstrates the confluence of Irish legislation with international proclamations of human rights. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 24 (2) (UNCRPD, 2006) called for inclusive education for all. The UNCRPD asserted that persons with disabilities were to have unequivocal right to inclusive, equitable and quality education at all levels without discrimination. It emphasised the full development of human potential, dignity and self-worth, and the enabling of effective participation in a free society. States Parties were asked to provide reasonable accommodations and individualised support, facilitating the learning of skills and communication methods like Braille and Irish Sign Language (ISL). Additionally, they must train educators, including those with disabilities, to support an inclusive educational environment. Access to further education, vocational training and lifelong learning must also be ensured on an equal basis.

Recently, the NCSE published an evidence-based policy paper (NCSE, 2024a) recommending the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system in the spirit of the UNCRPD. The paper is the result of an extensive review of the literature (NCSE, 2024b). The aim, over many years, is to ensure that all children can learn in their local schools alongside their peers, such that the prevalence of education in separate or segregated spaces is further reduced. However,

it is important to note that the NCSE's definition of inclusion is not solely about *placement* but has a broader meaning. For example, the core arguments in the policy paper represent a close connection with UNCRPD (2006) Article 24 (1a), which asserts the need for inclusive education to be moved towards the full development of human potential, sense of dignity and self-worth, with the strength of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity (Article 24 1b). The United Nations Committee (UNESCO, 2020) asserted that the exclusion of students with disabilities from regular or ordinary learning environments was not in line with the vision of education set out in the UNCRPD. Moreover, the UN Committees suggested there needed to be a full realisation that inclusive education was not compatible with the sustaining of two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a separate or parallel special education system (UNESCO, 2020). According to the NCSE (2019), the decision to move towards full inclusion in mainstream classes in mainstream schools needed careful consideration. While the UNCRPD (2006) recommended that all students be educated together, it was necessary to discern the feasibility of full inclusion for students, especially for those with low incidence medical or behavioural needs. The NCSE's approach to inclusion demonstrates the value that the agency places on ensuring the best interests of each student while ensuring that, where possible, all children are educated together, with the appropriate supports in place, unless there is a strong evidential basis to support an alternative approach (NCSE, 2019b). In 2023, this position was reiterated by John Kearney (NCSE CEO), who explained how the NCSE's vision was to be influenced by international policies that emphasise the right of all students to a quality education and the right of all students to be educated alongside their peers and experience education in the least restrictive environment (Kearney, 2023). When explaining the NCSE's vision, Kearney noted that 'it comes down to a child on a school corridor, a... child seeking enrolment in a school, or a... child looking for enhanced progression pathways after leaving school' (2023). This comes together to crystallise NCSE's commitment to enabling high-quality education for all within an inclusive milieu.

Further reflecting Ireland's position on inclusive education in the international context, it became one of the 31 countries to join the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) in the late 1990s (EASNIE, 2020). The EASNIE aims to promote high-quality inclusive practice and the greater inclusion of children with SEN in their communities and in mainstream schools. In its 2016 Annual Report (NCSE, 2017), the NCSE reported the benefits of Ireland's EASNIE membership and the way that this informed its research on initial teacher education for inclusion in the Irish context. All this illustrates how Ireland and the NCSE were positioning themselves as partners in an international community seeking to build a more equitable and inclusive school system for all children, including those with SEN.

The history of the NCSE

It is useful to summarise the key points in the history of the NCSE to date. Established in 2003 as a statutory body under EPSEN, 2004, the NCSE's statutory remit was to improve the delivery of education services to students with SEN. The EPSEN Act mandated the NCSE to plan, coordinate and review the provision of education and support services for children with SEN, ensuring their inclusion and participation in mainstream education where possible, while ensuring appropriate support and placement. Over the years, the NCSE's roles relating to the allocation of resources,

advising the Minister for Education on policy, and providing guidance and support to schools, parents and students regarding special education have grown. The NCSE has been instrumental in conducting and commissioning research to inform policy and practice in special education, to help ensure that evidence-based approaches are implemented in schools.

Actively contributing to the development of inclusive education policies in Ireland, the NCSE has advocated for the rights and needs of students with disabilities and promoted best practices in special education. It established a network of SENOs who work directly with schools, parents and students to facilitate appropriate educational placements and supports. The NCSE has been pivotal in developing frameworks and guidelines that promote inclusive education, ensuring that students with SEN receive appropriate support and accommodations in mainstream settings. Continuously adapting and evolving, the NCSE responds to the changing needs of students and the education system, ensuring that all children have access to high-quality, inclusive education. These key points highlight the NCSE's commitment to promoting inclusion in Ireland, making significant strides in ensuring that all students can achieve their full potential. Given the centrality of inclusive education to the NCSE's remit, it is apposite to consider how the NCSE's view of inclusion and inclusive education sits alongside a wider debate.

The NCSE and definitions of inclusion

The NCSE defines inclusion in education as ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equal opportunities to participate fully in all aspects of school life (NCSE, 2011, 2024). This definition encompasses several key elements: full participation, equitable access, respect for diversity, a supportive environment, collaboration and partnership, individualised education plans (IEPs) and professional development. Full participation means that students with disabilities should learn alongside their peers in general education classrooms whenever possible. Equitable access involves providing all students with the resources, supports and accommodations they need to succeed, such as tailored educational materials and assistive technologies. Respect for diversity entails valuing and respecting the diversity of all students, fostering an inclusive culture that promotes understanding and acceptance. A supportive environment includes both physical accessibility and a positive school climate that encourages the social and emotional wellbeing of all students. Collaboration and partnership involve working with parents, guardians and the wider community to support the inclusion of students with SEN, as well as professional collaboration among educators, support staff and specialists. Finally, professional development is essential for providing ongoing training and knowledge for teachers and school staff to effectively support inclusive education. The NCSE's approach to inclusion is based on the belief that inclusive education benefits all students by fostering a diverse, equitable and supportive learning environment, breaking down barriers to learning and participation, and ensuring that every student could achieve their full potential.

Comparing the NCSE definition to other prevalent views on the meaning of the term inclusion, similarities and differences can be observed. UNESCO defines inclusive education as a process that addresses and responds to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education (UNESCO, 2005). Like the NCSE, UNESCO emphasises equitable access and the

importance of a supportive environment. However, UNESCO places a broader emphasis on cultural and community aspects. Similarly, Booth and Ainscow's Index (2011) for Inclusion focuses on creating inclusive cultures, policies and practices in schools, advocating for a holistic approach that goes beyond individual accommodations (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). This aligns with the NCSE's comprehensive view but adds an explicit focus on policy and cultural change. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe inclusive education as practices that ensure all children are engaged and achieving within a common educational framework, emphasising the need for flexible teaching strategies and a commitment to equity and excellence. This definition resonates with the NCSE's emphasis on individualised support and professional development but stresses a universal approach to high-quality teaching for all as the substrate for inclusive schooling.

Overall, our analysis of the NCSE's definition of inclusion has revealed that it is comprehensive and aligns with key international perspectives, extending beyond a focus on where children with SEN are educated.

Vision 2026 and the NCSE's strategic priorities in a context of rising levels of need for support

The NCSE updates its 'Statement of Strategy' every three to five years, and the 2023-2026 statement reaffirms the organisation's mission, vision and values, as well as its goals and action plans (NCSE, 2024c). In the statement, the NCSE outlines its three main goals as follows:

- **The first goal** is to provide students, school communities and parents with professional, coordinated services and specialist support provision to ensure the best outcomes for students.
- **The second goal** is to develop and offer expert policy advice, practice and professional learning programmes that are evidence-informed and aligned with the latest national and international research.
- **The third goal** is to foster a progressive workplace culture by collaborating with staff to implement effective leadership and best practices.
- **The fourth goal** is to build a corporate identity focused on operational excellence, responsiveness, innovation and governance best practices.

These demonstrate that the NCSE is committed to prioritising student outcomes, evidence-based practices, staff development and organisational excellence, ensuring a comprehensive and forward-thinking approach to supporting education and special needs services. The 2023-2026 'Statement of Strategy' demonstrates that the NCSE's evolution remains congruent with its remit as the statutory body established by the EPSEN Act 2004. *Vision 2026* reiterates the organisation's core mission.

It is important to analyse patterns of increasing demand for the NCSE's services. In the last 12 years or so, there has been significant and rapid growth in SEN activity in Ireland's education system (Kearney, 2023). For example, there has been an 81 per cent increase in SNAs since 2013. By 2023, there were more than 21,000 across the system. By 2023, a 44 per cent increase in the number of SETs and a 117 per cent increase in applications for transport and assistive technology could be observed (Kearney, 2023). Investment in support for SEN now represents 27 per cent of Exchequer funding for education. In Ireland, the prevalence rate for autism/autistic spectrum disorder has risen from 1.5 per cent in 2021 to over 4 per cent in 2023. At the same time, there has been a very significant rise in the number of special classes in mainstream schools. Across primary schools, there has been an overall percentage rise of 556 per cent in the number of special classes established in 2010 compared with those established in 2022. Notably in 2022, autism classes and early-intervention classes for learners with ASD exhibit remarkable growth rates of 904 per cent and 619 per cent, respectively, underscoring a significant focus on addressing the needs of students on the autism spectrum. In contrast, some categories, such as behavioural and emotional difficulties and severe/profound general learning disability show fluctuations or modest declines over the period. Post-primary schools also witnessed a considerable expansion in special classes with an overall percentage rise of 665 per cent between 2010 and 2022. As with primary schools, the prevalence of classes catering to needs described as autism stands out, indicating a consistent effort to support students with ASD across both school phases. These patterns show how there has been significant growth in demand for support, and relatedly, demand for NCSE frontline services. However, up to 2022, the number of staff working in the NCSE remained largely static (Kearney, 2023).

In Budget 2023, following the presentation of a business case to the Minister of Education, an investment of nearly €13 million was made to support the expansion and development of the NCSE's workforce. This included the recruitment of more than 160 additional staff, most of these deployed to frontline services, such as SENOs as well as other support and administration/management staff. Table 2.1 summarises this expansion, and it is important to note that the staffing resource listed for 2022 was in place at the time when data was collected for this research. This may mean that the findings reflect, at least in part, the impact of a stretched workforce on the experiences of service users.

Table 2.1: NCSE staffing resources 2022 and 2024 (full-time equivalent for core roles)

Staff category	2022 FTE (actual at the time of data collection)	2024 FTE (estimates)
Civil servants (administrative)	43	88
Team manager	9	20
Specialist leads	4	18
SENOs	65.5	120
Therapists (incl. managers)	20	20
ISL advisors	0	4
Advisors	44	104
VTs	42	48
Total	230.5	426

As Table 2.1 demonstrates, the NCSE has significantly increased its staffing resources between 2022 and 2024 (estimated) across various staff categories. The number of administrative roles has more than doubled, rising from 43 to 88. Team managers have increased from 9 to 20, and specialist leads have seen a notable rise from 4 to 18. SENOs have increased from 65.5 to 120. ISL advisors, previously absent from the NCSE workforce, are now estimated at 4. Advisors have more than doubled from 44 to 104 and VTs have increased slightly from 42 to 48. Overall, the total staffing has increased from 230.5 in 2022 to an estimated 426 in 2024, reflecting a substantial expansion in NCSE's capacity to support special education needs.

To ensure that this additional resource was used in the most effective way possible, the NCSE implemented a transformation programme that included an assessment of the status of the organisation's core mission, current supply/demand patterns and projections for the future and the design of a new workforce strategy. The process took place between December 2022 and December 2023. In essence, the transformation programme described the NCSE's key role in realising in Ireland a 'world class, inclusive education system' (in the context of Irish and international policy; Kearney, 2023), and this evaluation has been commissioned to contribute to continuous improvement in that context.

The frontline services delivered by the NCSE

For the purposes of this review, and the evaluation more generally, frontline services refer to services that are highly visible to schools, pupils, parents, carers and other stakeholders. The evaluation team also conceptualised frontline services as most likely to have a direct impact on families, students and school communities as they figure in their day-to-day educational and professional experiences, as well as their interaction with the services (for example SENOs). Additionally, they are fundamental to the NCSE's mandate for advancing the effectiveness of the sector in achieving the intentions set out in the EPSEN Act 2004.

The following summarises the wider and frontline services provided for families and school communities. These services were the focus for this evaluation.

Placement planning and allocation

As a point of principle, and in the Irish legislative context (EPSEN Act 2004), pupils with SEN should, where possible, be educated in mainstream classes along with their peers, with additional supports provided, as necessary. However, as part of Ireland's continuum of provision, specialist placements are provided for pupils in two main forms. The first is placement in a special school; the second is placement in a special class in a mainstream school. The NCSE is responsible for monitoring needs across the country and planning for sufficient placements. In recent years, the NCSE has been instrumental in opening 11 new special schools in collaboration with the DE. This is informed by the NCCE's continual monitoring of need at the national and regional level.

Special classes and special schools

Special classes are offered within mainstream schools to provide a supportive learning environment for pupils with more complex SEN. The ratios for the number of teachers to the number of students are determined in DE policy.⁶ For example, in special classes, the ratio for students with ASD is six pupils to one teacher and two SNAs. For those with severe/profound learning disabilities, eight pupils to one teacher and one SNA are remitted (NCSE, 2016, p.19). Ireland has approximately 140 special schools that cater to students with various disabilities and special needs; this figure does not include hospital and detention schools. In Ireland there are specialist schools for students with mild or moderate learning disabilities, schools for visually or hearing-impaired students, schools for students with physical disabilities, schools for learners with ASD, and a few schools for students with emotional and/or behaviour difficulties. However, while specialist schools have official designations as indicated, they often enrol students with multiple needs.

Allocation additional staff

The NCSE is responsible for planning and coordinating school support for children with SEN, including the review of SNAs and SETs made by the DE to mainstream schools, as well as the allocation of SNAs and SETs to special schools and special classes within mainstream schools. Allocations of additional staff are made through a national allocation model that uses criteria set by the DE. Schools can also apply for additional staffing through the exceptional SET review process. The NCSE assesses the eligibility of claims for additional SNA and SET allocations and makes recommendations to the DE. Additionally, the NCSE reports annually on the number of SNAs and SETs allocated to primary schools, post-primary schools and special classes in Ireland, as well as the number and types of special classes.

⁶ Through the special educational teacher allocation model.

Allocating additional resources

The NCSE allocates additional resources via the SENO to support children with SEN in both mainstream and special schools. These resources include the DE's special transport scheme and DE grants for special equipment, including assistive technology (IRIS report, NCSE, 2015). In 2022, SENOs processed over 5,400 applications for school transport and 6,600 new applications for assistive technology and special equipment (NCSE, 2023b). Applications for assistive technology are made according to the provisions of DES Circular 0010/2013 (DES, 2013). Provision under this scheme is made for those pupils whose degree of disability is such that, without technological support, it will not be possible for them to access the school curriculum. This relates to primary category disabilities (sensory, physical and learning disabilities) and secondary category disabilities (ASD, specific learning difficulties, speech and language, multiple disabilities and medical needs). In Ireland's system, a primary disability refers to the main or most significant disability that impacts a child's learning or functioning. This is the disability that requires the most attention in terms of educational support and services, serving as the primary focus of interventions, and the child's needs are typically assessed based on this main disability. A secondary disability refers to an additional or less prominent disability that may also affect the child but is considered to have a lesser impact compared to the primary disability. While it may influence learning and functioning, it does not receive the same level of emphasis in educational planning as the primary disability, though it may still require some accommodations or support. This system helps to allocate appropriate resources and interventions based on the relative severity and impact of the disabilities. However, it is recognised that there is a spectrum of ability and disability within every 'category' of SEN and that types of disability overlap in unique ways according to the individual (NCSE, 2014).

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

The NCSE is tasked by the DE with commissioning, designing and deploying TPL so that professional skills, knowledge and self-efficacy for inclusive teacher practice are enhanced. In the Irish context, TPL is recognised as key to the effective implementation of its inclusive policies. Sessions (which may be seminars or workshops) are delivered by a range of providers, including NCSE professionals working in regional teams and commissioned organisations such as the Middletown Centre for Autism. Programmes and events are often designed and delivered by NCSE advisors and hence the NCSE itself. More detail on the role of NCSE advisors in TPL is outlined below. The NCSE also holds a database of practice resources for teachers on a wide range of topics, including metacognition, individualised planning, school self-evaluation and differentiation. In the context of TPL, developing educational strategies such as metacognition, individualised planning, school self-evaluation and differentiation is crucial for improving teaching effectiveness, particularly for students with special needs. Metacognition involves encouraging students to think about their own thinking, helping them to become self-regulated learners by reflecting on their learning strategies and progress. Individualised planning involves planning education to the specific needs and goals of each student, ensuring that targeted interventions are provided. School self-evaluation allows schools to assess their practices, identifying areas for improvement to ensure that support for students with special needs is continuously aligned with their requirements. Differentiation, which adapts teaching methods and content to accommodate the diverse abilities in a classroom, ensures that all students, including those with special needs, are given equal opportunities to succeed. Together, these strategies help create inclusive, adaptive learning environments that support personalised learning and promote success for all students, and so they are central to the NCCE's TPL offer.

In 2022, 5,226 teachers participated in professional development and learning in NCSE TPL seminars. A free-of-charge national training programme for SNAs was rolled out in 2021. A total of 1,332 SNAs graduated with a Certificate in Inclusive School Support in 2022 (NCSE, 2023b).

NCSE in-school advisory service

The NCSE in-school advisory service is established to provide relevant and effective support to school communities around special education. NCSE advisors possess expertise in one or more of the following areas: ASD, behaviour, curriculum and SEN. This frontline service has a range of responsibilities, assisting all schools in their capacity to meet the needs of students with SEN. This includes supporting the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) continuum of support model and facilitating the implementation of the SET allocation model.

The advisory service is dedicated to promoting and developing inclusive approaches, strategies, interventions and systems within schools. It involves delivering tailored support to school management, teachers and students, as required. Additionally, the NCSE advisory service aids schools in planning processes, curriculum development, pedagogy and the deployment of resources such as SNAs to enhance the inclusion of students with SEN. The service plays a crucial role in developing and delivering TPL in line with the Inclusive Education Framework, which encompasses national in-service training, in-school TPL, communities of practice, teacher professional networks and online support. The advisory service also contributes to creating resource materials for schools, including web-based resources, and supports the integration of ICT into teaching, learning and assessment. Effective communication with schools and educational partners, including collaborative projects and local initiatives, is a core function. Furthermore, the service's expertise is used in the delivery of TPL.

Policy and best practice guides/resources for schools

Under the functions of the EPSEN 2004 Act, the NCSE develops and disseminates information about policy and best practice in ways that develop the effectiveness of education for pupils with SEN. For example, in 2019 the NCSE published a progress report on its policy advice on special schools and classes (NCSE, 2023) and in 2018 it made available the findings of a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme (presented in report and infographic form) (NCSE, 2018). The NCSE posts a varied range of guides and resources for schools on its website.

SENOs and information/support for parents/carers

The NCSE provides information and support for parents/carers through published guides and resources and local support by SENOs. SENOs also advise and support schools when making applications for additional allocations of support, for example, exceptional reviews or additional equipment. They also advise parents/carers on support and placement options available for their children (for example early intervention, HT, making applications for special transport). From our analysis of NCSE's workforce structure, the evaluation team recognised the SENO's role as one of the most substantive in the NCSE, and SENOs are likely to have essential local knowledge and relationships with families and school communities.

Visiting Teacher Service (VTS)

The VTS provides advice, teaching and guidance to support educational provision for CYP who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired. This service is available from birth through to pre-school, primary and post-primary levels. The work of VTs involves liaising with other professionals and agencies such as audiological scientists, ophthalmology services, speech and language therapists, low-vision specialists, psychologists, early-intervention teams, school staff and parents/carers (NCSE, 2022b). VTs also provide advice for schools on effective inclusive practice and advice parent/carers on how to support their child.

Therapy support services

The NCSE has been piloting in-school therapy support services. This service is currently limited to one region and has been subject to evaluation. It is intended that this service be extended to other regions pending the approval of the Government of Ireland.

Research

As part of its remit, the NCSE is required to conduct, commission, publish and collate research that supports evidence-based policy decisions and best practices in schools. To date, the NCSE has published over 38 research reports on various topics related to special education, such as parental attitudes, experiences of pupils with SEN, assistive technology, SNA evaluation scheme and initial teacher education for inclusion.

Consultative role

Section 22 of the EPSEN Act 2004 establishes a consultative forum as a statutory measure. The NCSE's role is to appoint forum members (in consultation with the minister and other stakeholders such as the National Disability Authority and national associations of parents) and to convene meetings and/or collaborations of the forum with the purpose of reviewing the NCSE's performance and advising on its strategies. The NCSE also implements consultations with stakeholders (for example parents/carers, school leaders, teaching staff, voluntary bodies, advocacy groups, health professionals, DE officials) when developing its policies and procedures. For example, in developing its policy advice paper *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society* (NCSE, 2024), the council held over 40 consultation sessions with a wide range of stakeholders.

The structure of the NCSE

At the time of this evaluation, the NCSE had a regional management structure of five regions with a regional manager for each, 10 team managers (two in each of the five regions) and 61 SENOs (NCSE, 2022). Since the implementation of *Vision 2026*, there has been significant expansion of the staffing structure as summarised in Table 2.1 earlier, and at the point of writing, the regional resource had expanded to 20 local regional teams comprising 20 team managers.

Currently, each regional team manager is responsible for leading a team of NCSE advisors, SENOs and VTs, who provide services to schools for children with SEN within a particular area.

Vision 26

The *Vision 26* transformation programme has included a detailed workforce strategy that involves some restructuring of the frontline and wider workforce so that the expansion of this workforce can be used to improve the constancy and quality of the service delivered to families and school communities. The strategy has been developed to ensure that regional teams and managers have the capacity to deliver quality services that are both fit for purpose and responsive. *Vision 2026* has reiterated the core values at the heart of the work that NCSE staff do at all levels. These include the following:

- The NCSE ensures that frontline services work in ways that deliver the best possible outcomes for students with SEN, placing the student at the heart of everything it does.
- The NCSE provides a personalised, responsive, consistent, continuous and high-quality service, enhancing effectiveness through local knowledge and fostering strong relationships between the NCSE and its beneficiaries, including families, school communities and stakeholders.
- The NCSE holds all teams at every level accountable to meet public expectations.
- The NCSE uses data intelligently to anticipate and respond to future demand.
- The NCSE listens to and learns from its stakeholders.

The core values demonstrate how the NCSE is committed to service improvement.

Summary and Conclusion

This review explores policy development for SEN and inclusion in Ireland. It traces the evolution of policies for SEN in the country and identifies three distinct phases: the era of neglect and denial, the era of the special school and the phase of integration and inclusion. Beginning in the 1990s, policy interest shifted towards a more inclusive approach that positioned special education and general education within a more unified framework. Two international declarations, the UNCRC and the Salamanca Statement, influence Irish policy in a significant way. The Salamanca Statement calls for governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education and create inclusive schools, ensuring effective education for all children and improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the entire system. Additionally, the report of the Special Education Review Committee plays a fundamental role in driving the development of a more inclusive education system in Ireland. The NCSE's frontline services are its mainstay and deliver to the remit defined in the 2004 EPSEN Act, which is to oversee and coordinate the provision of resources and services for students with SEN. Though some provisions are yet to be implemented, the intention of the Act and the remit is to ensure that all children with SEN receive an education that is appropriate to their individual needs and abilities. The EPSEN Act is also currently being reviewed by the DE. The review aims to address implementation challenges and keep the Act relevant to the evolving needs of students with disabilities. It also seeks to incorporate stakeholder feedback, align with international standards, enhance inclusive practices and assess resource allocation to improve educational outcomes for students with SEN in Ireland.

In Ireland, demand for SEN services and accommodations is growing (Kearney, 2023). This has made the NCSE's operational load larger and more complex, and until 2024, with no accompanying growth in its workforce. This has happened in a context where some schools and parents/carers perceive insufficiencies in resources available to support students with SEN. More recently, the NCSE's *Vision 2026*, has emerged as a strategic transformation project focused on workforce development. The design principles of *Vision 2026* are formulated to ensure that additional funding provided to the agency by the Government of Ireland is deployed in the most effective way possible so that families, school communities and other stakeholders are assured of high-quality, efficient and effective services that create a responsive culture for service users.

This evaluation was enacted prior to the significant expansion of NCSE staff and has been commissioned to deliver key insights (from services users themselves) about the quality of services, their perceived impact, their strengths and how they can be improved. In this way, the evaluation informs the continuing development of *Vision 26*.

This contextual analysis has demonstrated that the NCSE is working in an ever-evolving policy and practice context. This discursive and polemical space demands of the NCSE continual development through consultation and collaboration, as well as an openness to public scrutiny. This evaluation reifies the NCSE's continued commitment to transparency and accountability and is designed to build public trust in the organisation through its focus on the experiences of service users, including CYP with SEN.

3. Methodological approach and sampling

The four RQs posed by this evaluation of the NCCE's frontline services are as follows:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NSSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

This section describes the methods used to investigate the RQs. It begins with a summary of the study sample along with the characteristics of each sample, describes the methods applied in detail and notes any limitations. However, before this is a brief outline of the preparatory work commissioned by the NCSE and conducted at the inception of the project, to determine the evaluation method that would be most fitting with these questions.

Preparatory work

The RQ related to the preparatory work for this evaluation was: 'What evaluation models are a good fit with the evaluation of the NCCE's frontline services?' It was important to select an evaluation model that could adequately and richly describe the impact of a complex range of services on a wide range of intended beneficiaries (schools, teaching staff, parent/carers and pupils).

The preparatory work involved a review of the national and international research literature related to the evaluation of public services. The review investigated:

- where models suited to the evaluation of frontline public services have been used successfully
- the extent of fit between each model and the evaluation of NCSE frontline services.

Following the review, a mixed, multi-methods impact evaluation was chosen as the model for this study because it was to focus on investigating the perspectives and experiences of service users themselves. This model could capture the lived experience of a broad range of service users and their perspectives on the impact of the NCCE's frontline services, as well of their experience of interacting with the services. This was important given that the NCCE's services are multiple, complex and potentially overlapping. It is also important given the NCCE's interest in public transparency. By focusing on collecting views from service users, a significant contribution is made towards enhancing transparency. For the NCSE, user feedback is crucial for identifying specific problems or areas where services may be lacking, providing detailed, ground-level insights that may not be apparent through internal assessments alone. This approach has the potential to lead to tangible improvements in service quality but also aligns public services more closely with public interests by ensuring that the voices of the community are heard and considered in

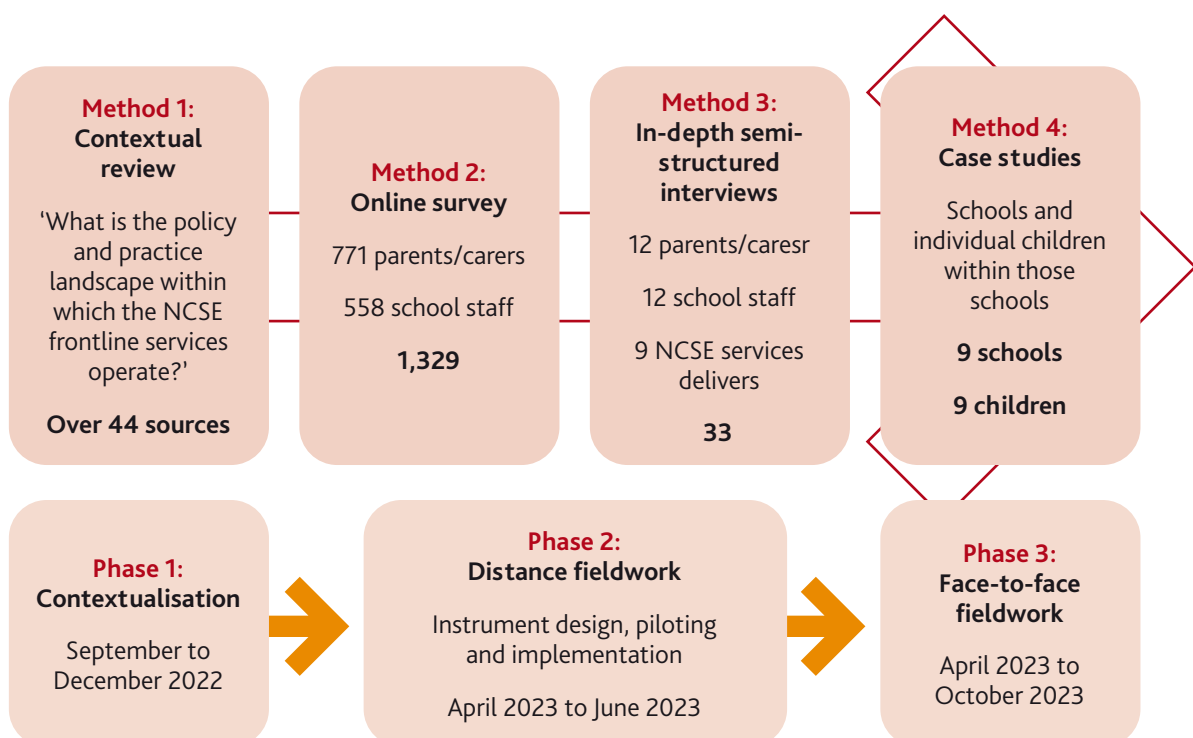
decision-making processes. Ultimately, a decision to use a multi-method, stakeholder-focused approach was made because when service users know their feedback can influence service provision, they are more likely to engage with the NCSE and participate in other civic activities, leading to a more empowered and active citizenry. All this is a good fit with the NCCE's stated goals for 2023-2026 (NCSE, 2024c).

Research design

The study deployed four methods within a rigorous, multi-method design. Methods and their related sample sizes were as follows:

- A contextual review drawing on over 44 sources, informing Section 2 of this report.
- An online survey of 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff.
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 parents/carers, 12 school staff and nine NCSE staff.
- Case studies of nine schools and nine children with SEN in those schools, including the participation of seven SNAs, two SENCOs, two SETs, 11 class teachers and five principals in interviews, focus groups or conversations. Figure 3.1 summarises the research design and illustrates how the study unfolded in three phases between September 2022 and October 2023.
- A total of 1,377 stakeholders participated in the research.

Figure 3.1: Research design



Children First and ethics

The research design prioritised children's safety and wellbeing. Researchers complied with the Children First Act (Government of Ireland, 2015) and adopted the principles of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA, 2011). This was to ensure that all personnel were aware of the key principles:

- To be aware of and recognise signs of child abuse and neglect.
- To know the designated person in a setting so that if there is a disclosure or if concerns arise, these can be referred to the designated person quickly.
- To operate with the utmost respect for children's voices in the development and enactment of data capture involving them, including processes of consent that secure permission from parents/carers and obtain students' consent and/or assent in accessible ways (for example by asking 'Is it still okay for me to ask you some questions?' and using assent methods that are appropriate for the age and communication preferences of children, such as reading gestures and engagement as signs of willingness to continue).

The research enacted ethical principles such as voluntary informed consent, protection of participants, secure data management and participant debriefing. The study design, instrumentation and consent processes were reviewed and approved by the UoD Ethics Committee for the College of Arts, Humanities and Education.

Details of the approval record from the ethics committee are as follows:

- Project ID: PSL2122-0384
- Approval Record: ETH22232356.

A summary of the characteristics of samples for each method follows, starting with the survey samples.

Description of the sample and sample characteristics

This subsection provides an overview of the study sample and characteristics for each method and respondent group. It reports samples for the online survey, in-depth interviews, and case studies, starting with the surveys.

Achieved sample for the surveys

The survey achieved a total of 1,317 responses with 770 being parents/carers and 547 being schools. Consideration of representativeness is outlined later in this section.

Table 3.1: Achieved sample for surveys of school staff and parents/carers

Survey group	Completed surveys in English	Completed surveys in Irish	Total completed	Target for this cohort	Distance to target
Parents/carers	770	1	771	c.900	-129
Schools	547	11	558	c.270	+288
TOTAL	1317	12	1329	1170	+159

Online survey: parents/carers, characteristics of the sample

The parent/carer survey received 771 responses. Overall, 65 per cent of parents/carers had one child with a disability or SEN and 31 per cent had more than one. Ninety-four per cent of respondents had a child with a specific diagnosis and 4 per cent did not currently have a diagnosis. Sixty-eight per cent of parents/carers were aware of their child's disability or special educational need before their child started school. Table 3.2 shows the types of disability or special educational need reported by parents/carers as experienced by their child.

Table 3.2: Type of child's disability as identified by parent/carer in survey⁷

Type of Need	Percentage
Autism/ASD	46%
Multiple disabilities	16%
Visual impairment	7%
Hearing impairment	6%
Physical disability	4%
MGLD	4%
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with another disability	4%
Severe/profound general learning disability	2%
Specific speech and language disorder	2%
Specific learning disorder (SLDN)	2%
Emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	1%
ADHD	1%
Developmental coordination disorder/dyspraxia (DCD)	1%
Down syndrome	1%
Mild learning disability	1%
Severe Emotional Disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	0%
Sensory processing disorder (SPD)	0%
Other	1%
Prefer not to say	1%

It was most common for parents/carers to have one child who had been supported by NCSE services (70 per cent), 17 per cent had two and 4 per cent had three or more children receiving support from NCSE. The type of class attended is shown in Table 3.3 and illustrates that the majority of children were attending a mainstream class in a mainstream school with 37 per cent being in some form of specialist provision.

⁷ Table 3.2 is based on survey Question A9, where parents were asked 'How would you describe your child's primary disability or special educational need?' When asked if their child had any further disabilities or special educational needs, a further 8 per cent reported their child had a hearing impairment and a further 9 per cent a visual impairment. Assuming no overlap, this equates to 17 per cent of parents.

Table 3.3: Type of class child attends as identified by parent/carer in survey

Type of class	Percentage
Mainstream class in a mainstream school	60%
Special class in a mainstream school	22%
Special school	15%
Awaiting placement in special school	0%
Homeschool no school	1%
Pre-school (school type unspecified)	1%

One in five (21 per cent) of the schools attended were part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme and 61 per cent were not. Three-quarters (73 per cent) of respondents were providing details about a child of primary-school age and 23 per cent of post-primary age. About a quarter (28 per cent) respondents were based in Dublin and nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) in other counties.

Online survey: school staff – characteristics of the sample

The staff survey received 558 responses. Most schools (98 per cent) had students with disabilities or SEN on roll in the academic year in question. Most respondents were leaders: 72 per cent were principals and 8 per cent were deputy principals. Only 4 per cent were class teachers and just 9 per cent SETs. Mainstream schools without special classes accounted for just over two-fifths (41 per cent of completed surveys) and just over a quarter (25 per cent) were mainstream schools with special classes. Table 3.4 shows the full breakdown for types of schools in which respondents worked.

Table 3.4: Type of school in which school staff were working when completing the survey

Type of School	Percentage
Mainstream school without special classes	41%
Mainstream school with special classes	27%
DEIS mainstream school without special classes	15%
DEIS mainstream school with special classes	12%
Special school	5%
Mainstream	95%
DEIS mainstream	27%
Not DEIS mainstream	68%

Around a quarter (23 per cent) of the respondents were based in Dublin; the remaining three-quarters (77 per cent) were in other counties. Awareness and knowledge of the NCSE was high, with 98 per cent reporting this, leaving 2 per cent who were aware of NCSE but did not know much about them. Table 3.5 shows the types of needs identified by respondents as being among the pupils attending the schools.

Table 3.5: Types of needs in schools in the survey

Type of need	Percentage
ASD	93%
Specific speech and language disorder	68%
Emotional disturbance	67%
MGLD	63%
Physical disability	52%
Multiple disabilities	48%
Hearing impairment	44%
Severe emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	38%
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the disabilities listed in the rows above	37%
Visual impairment	28%
Severe/profound general learning disability	8%
Specific learning disabilities	8%
ADHD	3%
Mild general learning disability	3%
Other genetic/chromosomal disorders	2%
Other medical needs	2%
Dyspraxia	2%
Sensory and behavioural needs (unspecified)	1%
Other	1%
Prefer not to say	1%

In-depth interviews: parents/carers

Twelve parents/carers participated in the in-depth interviews. Parents/carers from eight counties were sampled (Table 3.6). Eight parents/carers described their child's main area of need as ASD, one as mild Down syndrome and three as multiple needs. Four participants described their child as being in a mainstream class, six in a special class in a mainstream school and three in special schools. Three participants in the sample communicated positive sentiments overall, four mixed sentiments (with a leaning towards positive), three mixed sentiments and two negative sentiments. Participants resided in a range of locations across several counties, including Co. Dublin (specifically Fingal and South Co. Dublin), Co. Meath, Co. Westmeath, Co. Galway, Co. Louth, Co. Kildare and Co. Cork.

Table 3.6: Characteristics of parents/carers interview sample

ID	Child's main area of need (as described by parents/ carers)	Type of placement	Sentiment
PC1	ADHD, dyspraxia and ODD	Mainstream class in mainstream school	Mixed
PC2	ASD and sensory processing	Special class in a mainstream school	Mixed
PC3	ASD	Special school	Mixed
PC4	'Mild' Down syndrome	Mainstream class in mainstream school	Mixed to positive
PC5	ASD	Special class in mainstream school	Mixed to positive
PC6	Dyspraxia, dyslexic, hypermobility (ASD suspected but not diagnosed)	Mainstream class in mainstream school	Mixed to positive
PC7	ASD – two children	Special schools	Mixed to positive
PC8	ASD	Special class in a mainstream school	Negative
PC9	ASD	Special school	Negative
PC10	ASD	Special class in a mainstream school	Positive
PC11	ASD	Special class in a mainstream school	Positive
PC12	Deaf, partially blind, mobility issues	Special class in a mainstream school	Positive

In-depth interviews: school staff

Twelve school staff participated in the in-depth interviews. School staff from eight counties were sampled (Table 3.7). The roles of participants included class teacher (n=3), Deputy Principal (n=1), Principal (n=7) and SET/Deputy Principal (n=1). One school was a hospital school, three were post-primary and eight were primary. Most schools represented were mainstream (n=10) and two were specialist schools. Overall, five participants in the sample had a positive sentiment about the NCSE and its services, five had a mixed sensitive and two a negative sentiment. The school staff participants resided in various locations across several counties, including Co. Galway, Co. Meath, Co. Tipperary, Co. Cork, Co. Dublin, Co. Kildare, Co. Offaly and Co. Wexford.

Table 3.7: Characteristics of school staff interview sample

ID	Role	Type of School	Sentiment
CT1	Class teacher	Primary, mainstream	Mixed
CT2	Class teacher	Primary mainstream with special class(es)	Mixed
SET	Class teacher (SET)	Primary special	Mixed
DP1	Deputy principal	Post-primary mainstream	Positive
SP1	School principal	Primary, mainstream with special class(es)	Positive
SP2	School principal	Primary, mainstream with special class(es)	Negative
SP3	School principal	Hospital school	Positive
SP4	School principal	Primary mainstream	Mixed
SP5	School principal	Primary mainstream with special class(es)	Mixed
SP6	School principal	Post-primary mainstream with special class(es)	Positive
SP7	School principal	Post-primary, mainstream	Negative
DP2	SET and deputy principal	Primary Mainstream (Irish Medium) with special class(es)	Positive

In-depth Interviews – NCSE staff and associates

Nine NCSE/other staff were interviewed. These represented a range of roles including SENOs, advisory teachers, HSE staff, VTs, NCSE advisors and senior staff. Table 3.10 offers a summary of the roles of participants interviewed.

Table 3.8: Characteristics of NCSE staff and associates' sample

Role
Assistant principal officer in the Special Education section of the department
Regional manager
Senior data manager
Working in HSE – currently in Mental Health Services
Specialist lead
SENO
VT
Member of executive team
NCSE advisor

Case Studies: schools

While it was not possible to achieve representativeness with a small sample, the school types recruited for the case studies are included in Table 3.9 to show the variety of settings that the study engaged in this method.

Table 3.9 Overview of case-study schools

S1	Special school for children with mild general learning disability and/or autistic children (primary/post-primary)
S2	Special school for children with ASD (primary/post-primary)
S3	Special school for the deaf (primary/post-primary)
S4	Mainstream primary school (mixed)
S5	Mainstream primary school (mixed)
S6	Gaelcholáiste (post-primary Irish medium school)
S7	Mainstream primary school (Educate Together) (class for children with ASD)
S8	Post-primary mainstream school (girls)
S9	9. Special School for children with a moderate, severe or profound general learning disability (primary and post-primary)

Table 3.10 summarises the CYP who participated in the case studies. Note that each TR was initially allocated two school settings and associated a code from 1 to 12 as it was envisaged that 12 case studies would be conducted. However, only nine case study sites participated in the research, hence the disruption in the coding sequence for CYP IDs, which equally applies to the IDs for the individual school settings. IDs allocated for C7; C10 and C12 were not used while IDs C1 to C6, C11 and C8 to C9 were used (Table 3.10).

Table 3.10 CYP who participated in the case studies

CYP	CYP ID	Needs	Gender	Age (years)	School Setting and ID
CYP 1	C1	Mild general Learning disability, dyslexia, anxiety	Female	14	Post-primary mainstream school (girls] – CS1
CYP2	C2	ASD, dyslexia, self-regulation challenges	Male	12	Mainstream primary school CS4
CYP 3	C3	ASD	Male	17	Special school for children with ASD (primary/post-primary) CS3
CYP 4	C4	Confrontational issues manifested in confronting authority	Male	10	Mainstream primary school (Educate Together) (class for children with ASD) CS2
CYP5	C5	Cochlear implant, uses ISL and speech to communicate.	Male	8	Special school children with visual impairment (primary/post-primary) CS5
CYP 6	C6	Intellectual and adaptive functioning difficulties.	Male	18	Special School for children with a moderate, severe or profound general learning disability (primary and post-primary) CS8
CYP 7	C11	Anxiety and self-regulation challenges	Male	17	Gaelcholáiste (post-primary Irish medium school) CS11
CYP 8	C8	Wheelchair user	Female	16	Special school for children with mild general learning disability and/or children with ASD (primary/post-primary] CS6
CYP 9	C9	Speech and language delay	Male	7	Mainstream primary school (mixed) CS9

Methods

This subsection provides a detailed account of each method starting with the online surveys.

Online Surveys

Questionnaire design process

The surveys were designed between November 2022 and February 2023 and were informed by the findings from Phase 1 of the research (contextualisation). They were peer reviewed by the wider project team and the project steering group at the NCSE. The surveys included questions on demographic data to support analysis of outcomes and impact against other factors such as region, types of setting (special school, special class in mainstream school, etc.) and the nature of the child's need/s. Questionnaires were cognitively tested with respondents before survey launch, meaning that researchers observed respondents as they engaged in the survey and interviewed them about their interpretations and experiences so that the design could be improved. Changes following cognitive testing included revision to the size bandings (for example for school rolls) and ensuring that terms used were consistent and not ambiguous. Both surveys were available online in Irish and in English.

The questionnaires included an introduction to the project with a link to the survey privacy notice and GDPR considerations, plus a re-contact question asking permission to follow up respondents with invitations to participate in the qualitative stages of the evaluation (in-depth interviews and case studies).

Sampling, recruitment and representativeness of the surveys

For valid data protection reasons (under the GDPR), NCSE was unable to provide a centralised list of parents/carers or schools which had engaged with NCSE services, so there is no population sample against which to assess the representativeness of the respondent group or its subgroups (for example type of need, region of residence). For this reason, data has not been weighted for either survey. Open survey links were disseminated through partners, such as school management/principal bodies and advocacy bodies and newsletters. To aid recruitment of schools the Joint Managerial Body Secretariat of Secondary Schools and Irish Primary Principals' Network sent out an email on our behalf to all providers that had made applications to or received support from NCSE. The email included a link to the survey that was open from 9 March 2023 to 15 May 2023. School Principals were asked to forward the email to colleagues if there was a more appropriate respondent within the school. There were 558 responses to the school staff survey.

In the case of the survey of school staff, it is possible to estimate a response rate. The overall school population includes c.3,000 primary schools, c.700 post-primary schools and c.130 special schools, a total of 3,830 schools. This suggests completion of the survey by up to 15 per cent of schools, which means the team can be more confident about the representativeness of this sample overall, but not confident enough to weight means according to subgroups within the sample.

The National Parents Council and Open Our Schools (both large representative groups for parents) sent out an email on our behalf inviting parents/carers of children who had applied for or received support from NCSE to take part in the survey. The email included a link to the survey, which was open from 9 March 2023 to 15 May 2023. There were 771 responses to the parent/carer survey. It is not possible to calculate a response rate as there was no means for tracking how many parents/carers were sent the survey link. Each respondent was asked to answer in relation to one child only. In the case of the parent/carers survey, it is not possible to estimate representativeness because the population from which the sample is drawn cannot be clearly enough defined. This means the team must be less confident about the representativeness of this sample and the generalisability of the findings to the wider population.

Survey content parents/carers

The survey questionnaire covered:

- Demographic details, including the child's disability/additional needs
- Awareness of the NCSE
- Views on services provided by the NCSE, specifically:
 - SENO support with applications for additional staff, transport, HT, placement and information/guidance
 - VTS
 - any other services that the parent/carer has interacted with
 - NCSE resources for parents/carers (website, published guides, videos)
 - the extent to which the child has benefited from NCSE services and the impact on the child and parent/carer.

Survey questions included Likert scales, ranking scales, tick lists and optional free-text boxes (see the Appendix for the full questionnaire). Survey responses were checked and anonymised. IFF Research Ltd then produced tables for each question comparing responses by key breaks (these were: the type of class/school attended by child; if the school was part of a DEIS programme; the child's school phase (primary/post-primary); parent/carer awareness of NCSE before their child started school; and the type of support received from NCSE).

Survey content school staff

The survey of school staff covered:

- demographic details about the school including the number of children with disabilities and/or additional needs and the type of school
- awareness and experience of NCSE services
- views on quality and benefit of specific NCSE services:

- NCSE advisory service
 - VTS
 - TPL
 - research and consultation forums
 - NCSE guides and resources (including website).
- overall satisfaction with NCSE services.

Survey questions included Likert scales, ranking scales, tick lists and optional free-text boxes (see the Appendix for the full questionnaire). Survey responses were checked and anonymised. Tables were produced for each question and responses were compared by key subgroups. For schools, these were: type of school (for example mainstream, DEIS mainstream, special); school size; school age range; awareness of the NCSE; overall satisfaction with NCSE; respondent job role; and whether a child in the school has received support from NCSE.

Online survey analysis and presentation

The analysis deployed descriptive methods of data analysis to summarise the data and identify differences between groups. The team then undertook exploratory analysis to identify patterns and differences in responses from groups of respondents. When analysing each survey, the team ran two-tailed z-tests to identify where responses from specific subgroups were statistically significantly different from the others. These significance tests were conducted where base sizes were higher than 50 to maximise the confidence of claims about statistically significant differences. Details of the full population profile were not available, so the survey data was not weighted. As a result, the findings should be taken as indicative, as the team cannot be certain that the profile of respondents is the same as the profile of the overall target audience (for example applicants to and users of NCSE frontline services). Subgroup base sizes were often small, meaning that robust statistical analysis of these subgroups was not possible (for example, statistically significant differences). Where base sizes did allow this analysis and there were significant differences, these have been reported. Where no mention is made of subgroup differences, the base sizes were too small or there were no statistically significant differences.

In-depth interviews

Interview schedules were designed for three groups – school staff, parents/carers and NCSE staff. Schedules were structured to have an opening question such as (for parents/carers) 'In your experience, what has been the impact of the VTS on you and your child?' and follow-up questions where needed such as 'What have been the impacts on your child's wellbeing?'

All interview schedules were piloted. Following piloting, the team revised the data collection instrument to ensure that it was working effectively as an elicitation tool. Changes were made to the structure of the interview to ensure that participants were able to focus their time on questions related to services they had used or encountered. More prompts about the impact of frontline services were added to scaffold participants' reflections on how the service had influenced inclusion (for example progress, wellbeing, access to education).

Parents/carers

The in-depth interviews with parents/carers included the following topic areas:

- their child(ren)'s strengths, needs and placement
- experiences and impact of (where relevant):
 - The VT service
 - The NCSE advisory service
 - SENOs
 - HT
 - Additional resources, such as technology
 - Special transport
 - NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers
 - Consultative forums.
- Experiences of relationships, cooperation and collaboration
- Perspectives on what was working well for impact and what could be improved

School Staff and NCSE staff

The in-depth interviews with school staff and NCSE staff included the following topic areas:

- Participants' current role and working context
- Experiences and impact of (where relevant):
 - the VTS
 - the NCSE advisory service
 - SENOs, including information and advice for parents/carers
 - allocations, exceptional reviews and appeals
 - additional resources, such as technology
 - special transport

- TPL
 - policy guides and best practice guides/resources
 - research published or commissioned by the NCSE
 - NCSE website and School Support Portal
 - consultative forums.
- experiences of relationships, cooperation and collaboration
 - perspectives on what was working well for impact and what could be improved.

Participants for interviews were recruited through the survey. Respondents could indicate if they wanted to participate in interviews and provided contact details on a voluntary basis. Around 30 per cent of respondents provided re-contact details. From the cohort of respondents providing re-contact details, an interview sample was selected to represent varied roles and context (for example type of school, type of need, region) and overall sentiment (that is, if their rating of quality and impact was largely positive, negative or mixed). The selection aimed to balance types of sentiment so that the factors influencing perceptions could be understood. The team used iterative selection to ensure the sample was balanced in the way just described. It did not have a surfeit of participants who responded to the re-contact option and was able to interview all who had agreed to participate following the issue of the invitations.

Interviews were recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed. Thematic analysis was applied (Braun and Clark, 2017) and each transcript was coded inductively in NVIVO using the following systematic process:

- *familiarisation with the data* (immersion in the data through multiple readings to gain a comprehensive understanding)
- *generating initial codes* (identifying and labelling initial codes that represent patterns, themes or interesting features in the data)
- *searching for themes* (group-related codes into potential themes based on patterns or connections)
- *reviewing and defining themes* (refining and reviewing themes by examining their coherence and relevance to the RQ or objectives; defining each theme to capture the essence of the underlying meaning)
- *constructing a thematic map* (creating a thematic map that illustrates the relationships between themes and their hierarchical structure, if applicable)
- *defining and naming themes* (clearly defining and naming each theme to convey its content and significance)
- *checking against the data* (validating the analysis by revisiting the raw data to ensure that the themes accurately represent participants' perspectives)

- Across the UoD Consortium, creating a coding frame and applying a second level analysis to the whole qualitative data, ensuring consistency of application by the coding team.
- *seeking feedback* (sharing the analysis across the consortium to obtain feedback on the validity and reliability of the identified themes)
- *refining the analysis* (refining the analysis iteratively based on feedback and further examination of the data, identifying latent themes as phenomena of interest. The term 'latent' refers to analysis that goes beyond the explicit content to explore underlying or implicit meanings, assumptions and concepts. The aim was to garner insights that were not immediately apparent in the data).

This process was applied to prepare for the thematic reporting of findings requested in the commission. It was also to ensure that findings were analysed and reported in ways that answered the RQs in a nuanced and complex way.

Semantic and latent analysis

The process applied both semantic and latent analysis.

Semantic analysis focused on the explicit meaning of the words and phrases used in the data. It examined the surface-level content to identify themes, patterns and sentiments directly expressed by participants. This type of analysis sought to understand what participants were saying in a straightforward manner, capturing the intended meaning without delving into deeper implications. Researchers using semantic analysis looked for frequently mentioned words, phrases or concepts, summarising the explicit messages conveyed in interviews, focus groups or open-ended survey responses.

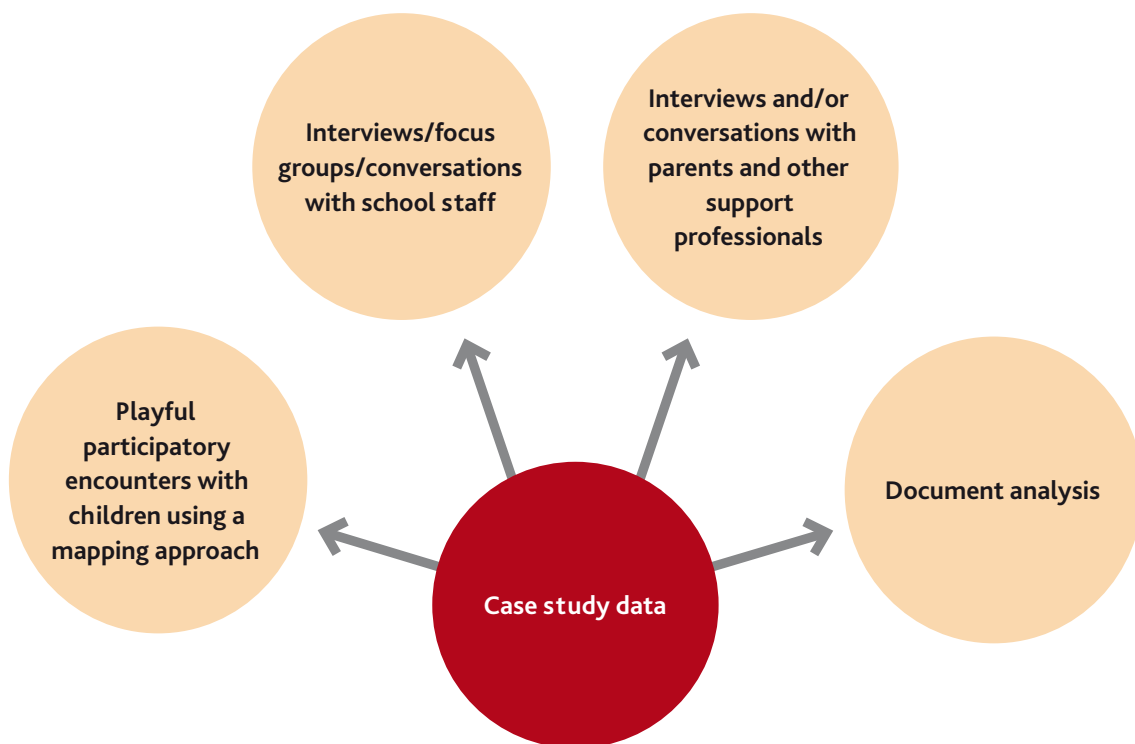
Latent analysis went beyond the surface-level meaning of the data to explore underlying themes, motivations and assumptions that may not have been explicitly stated. This approach sought to uncover deeper insights and interpretations by looking at the context, implications and the broader social or psychological factors that were influencing participant sentiment. In latent analysis, researchers looked for relationships between participants' sentiments and their experiences of working with the NCSE. In summary, while semantic analysis focused on the explicit content of qualitative data to understand what was being said, latent analysis sought to uncover the underlying meanings and implications, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the data. Both approaches complemented each other in qualitative research to create a comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

Case studies

The case studies were designed to illustrate NCSE frontline services in context. Figure 3.2 provides an overview of the methods used to collect data during the case-study phase of the evaluation. As part of the broader data collection strategy, the case studies helped to answer the following questions:

- 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services provided on school staff, students and parents/carers?'
- 'What is working well in frontline services to deliver positive impacts?'
- 'What improvements within frontline services will enhance positive impacts?'

Figure 3.2: Case-study data collection methods



With the support of EPISE at MIC, the research team recruited six teachers (three primary and three post-primary) to assume the role of co-researchers for the case-study phase of the evaluation. The six TRs were qualified teachers with post-graduate qualifications in the area of special and inclusive education. They all had roles in special education in their schools and had extensive experience of inclusion and best practice in providing for CYP with SEN. The TRs' schools or 'co-research schools' were required to support the TRs' engagement in the professional learning programme and in the case study fieldwork. Co-research schools received a compensation payment to support substitution costs to facilitate TRs' engagement with the research.

To support TRs in their role, the research team developed an online professional learning programme that was delivered via Microsoft Teams. The principles of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2008) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018) were embedded within the programme. A mixed approach that combined live (synchronous) and on-demand (asynchronous) content was used during the preparation programme to ensure appropriate support for the TR community (Martin *et al.*, 2020). An overview of the content of the preparation programme is included in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11 Overview of teacher-researcher (TR) preparation programme

Session	Content	Duration
Session 1: Introduction to the project	• Getting to know each other • Overview of the evaluation and case studies • Overview of the TR preparation programme • Exploring our own interests, capabilities, needs and concerns • Planning ahead	1.5 hours
Session 2: Instrumentation for case studies: interviews and conversations with adults	• SCOT analysis following on from Session 1 • Feedback on pre-released material. • Feedback on the draft topic guides • Trying out mapping in our own teaching context.	1 hour (+30 mins pre-released material)
Session 3: Instrumentation for case studies: participatory encounters with CYP	• NCSE evaluation: project update from UoD • Rationale for engaging CYP in the evaluation • Ethical research with CYP • Facilitating participatory encounters with CYP • Feedback on instruments for participatory encounters	1 hour (+30 mins pre-released material)
Session 4: Preparing for fieldwork	• Sharing experience of using instruments in own teaching context • Selecting options of participatory encounters with CYP • TR Feedback on case study templates • Overview on sampling: case-study schools • General discussion and feedback	1 hour (+20 mins pre-released material)
Session 5: Working with Fieldwork Data	• Using the TR handbook • Update on case studies • Navigating MS Teams • Working with data collected • Developing the case studies • Feedback on programme	1 hour

Table 3.11 (above) shows that the professional development programme prepared TRs through five structured sessions focusing on evaluation techniques and participatory methods. The sessions covered topics such as ethical research with CYP, using research instruments and working with data, gradually building on the TRs' skills and knowledge. Pre-released materials complemented the training, allowing TRs to engage with the content before each session and apply it in their own teaching contexts and in the schools where they were to gather data for the case studies.

TRs were supported by the research team through regular check-in sessions, during their engagement with the fieldwork in case-study schools and during the write-up of the case-study data. The preparation programme also supported the co-construction of the case-study data collection tools by the research team and the TRs. TRs actively contributed to the final design of the interview schedules and the participatory encounters with CYP. The project steering group at the NCSE also reviewed the instruments.

The research process was greatly enriched by the close-to-practice expertise that teachers brought to the research and evaluation process, which potentially cannot be equalled by a researcher who is more distant from the practice. The combination of teachers and researchers working together as co-researchers was a powerful combination that supported the overall quality of research output.

Case studies of schools and case selection

Nine case studies were conducted in primary, post-primary and special schools involving CYP, parents-carers, principals, teachers and SNAs supporting children with SEN in the case-study schools.

Based on the timescale for this research, it was initially decided to include 12 case-study schools. However, due to time-constraints and challenges in recruiting schools, this number was reduced to nine. Cognisant that this sample size could not constitute a representative sample, the team employed a two-phase purposeful and pragmatic sampling framework that focused on selecting typical sites based on the continuum of education provision in Ireland (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

At recruitment point one, schools were selected with reference to the variety of typical provision across primary, post-primary and special school contexts and including an Irish-medium school. It was also considered important that a school context with a DEIS designation be included in the sample. Geographical location of schools to facilitate the TRs was also identified as a consideration for the selection of schools at phase two.

At recruitment point two, nine schools who had indicated in the survey that they would be interested in taking part in a further case study were contacted by the researchers via email. Of these, six schools agreed to participate and no response was received from the remaining three schools contacted. Using available DE and NCSE school data bases, the researchers contacted three further schools, one agreed to participate, one did not respond and one responded that they were not in a position to participate. Having secured seven schools from the survey and

DoE/NCSE data bases, the researchers contacted two remaining schools that the researchers were familiar with and satisfied the criteria identified at phase one in relation to school type. The two mainstream primary schools (mixed) in Table 3.10 also had a DEIS designation. The TRs' geographical location was also considered in this regard to facilitate the TRs and minimise disruption to their respective schools. The researchers however also directed attention to ensuring that the case-study schools were not all located in geographical proximity to the researchers.

Within Case Data-Sampling

As it was not possible to engage with all stakeholders and all documentation in each setting, within case-sampling was also conducted for each school visit (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The focus of the visits remained on understanding the CYP's experience of school. In order to augment this understanding, the CYP's parent and relevant school staff were also invited to participate in conversations. Relevant documentation and artefacts together with observation of the child's environment were also key elements for understanding the CYP's school experience. Rather than deploying pre-determined schedules, these elements were led by the school in accordance with the organic and spontaneous approach to data collection that characterised the case-study approach adopted. The importance of understanding children's experiences in the context of their environments, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework, was the impetus for including others in the conversations during these visits (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Ring *et al.*, 2021). Table 3.12 displays the school details and a summary of the data-collection events that took place during each school visit.

Table 3.12: Case-study sample details

Case study number	School number	Enrolment	Children with SEN	Case study data sources
CSI	S8	750	96	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Interview with CYP's parent • Focus group with three SNAs • Interview with SENCO • Conversation with SETs
CS2	S4	243	30	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Focus group with two class teachers. • Conversation with principal.
CS3	S2	61	61	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Conversation with principal • Conversation with two class teachers • Conversation with one SNA

Case study number	School number	Enrolment	Children with SEN	Case study data sources
CS4	S7	423	150	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Conversation with SENCO
CS5	S3	40	40	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Interview with class teacher • Conversation with one SNA
CS6	S9	87	87	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Interview with principal • Conversation with two teachers • Conversation with one SNA
CS7 (Original code CS11)	S6	650	150	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Conversation with class teacher
CS8	S1	226	226	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Conversation with principal • Conversation with two class teachers • Conversation with two SNAs
CS9	S5	175	56	• Conversation and mapping task with CYP • Conversation with CYP's parent • Interview with principal • Interview with class teacher • Conversation with SET • Conversation with one SNA

Case studies of parents, teachers, SNAs

To elicit the perspectives of parents/carers, school leader, teachers and SNAs on NCSE frontline services, TRs adopted a flexible approach to data capture, which included one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews. Interview schedules were designed to provide structure to the TRs' conversations with parents/carers and school staff. Interview schedules included the following topics:

Parent/Carers

- their child(ren)'s strengths, needs and placement
- experiences and impact of (where relevant)
- the VTS
- the NCSE advisory service
- SENOs
- HT
- additional resources (such as technology)
- special transport
- NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers
- consultative forums
- experiences of relationships, cooperation and collaboration
- perspectives on what was working well for impact and what could be improved.

School staff

- participants' current role and working context
- experiences and impact of (where relevant)
- the VTS
- the NCSE advisory service
- SENOs, including information and advice for parents/carers.
- allocations, exceptional reviews and appeals
- additional resources (such as technology)
- special transport
- TPL
- policy guides and best-practice guides/resources

- NCSE website and School Support Portal
- consultative forums
- experiences of relationships, cooperation and collaboration
- perspectives on what was working well for impact and what could be improved

TRs also invited teachers to share documentary artefacts or other relevant objects relevant to the evaluation of NCSE frontline services (for example information for parents/carers, displays, building alterations, equipment). In the context of the evaluation, the term 'documents' was interpreted 'in its widest sense, including the use of a wide range of visual texts' (Mukherji and Albon 2018). The use of documents and the artefacts in the case study supplemented findings from other methods such as interviews and playful participatory encounters. TRs recorded any information on documents or artefacts in written notes. Alternatively, where there was permission, photographs were taken of anonymised artefacts.

Case studies of students with SEN

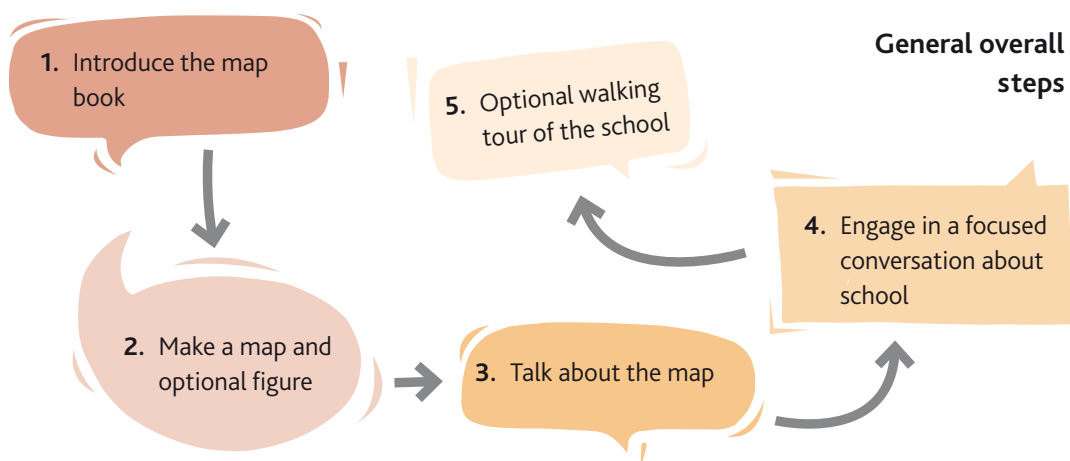
According to Ring *et al.* (2021, p. 42), 'The rationale for capturing the voices of all children is threefold in terms of being a matter of human rights and social justice; optimising children's learning and development and central to the concept of democracy in education.' The evaluation of NCSE frontline services involved research *with* children rather than research *on* children (Gray and Winter 2011). The overarching aim of CYP case studies was to explore NCSE frontline services from the perspective of CYP who engage with these services. In the context of NCSE frontline services, TRs elicited and recorded CYP perspectives and their response to everyday events in their school life. The participatory encounters were designed to explore the following questions:

- 'How is the CYP experiencing school?'
- 'How is their education being supported?'
- 'What is working well?'
- 'What could work better for the CYP?'

The research team was committed to designing an approach that used, flexibly, modes of communicating, recording and representing with which the CYP was familiar. Mapping was adopted in the participatory encounters. This method has previously been used in participatory research with CYP (Gowers, 2022; Ring, 2024; Robinson *et al.* 2024). Maps combine various modes including drawing, writing, image, gesture, movement, sounds and speech to communicate meaning (Gowers, 2020). Following piloting of the mapping method in the TRs' own teaching context, the CYPs confirmed that mapping was perceived as a meaningful and relevant task. The mapping activity was, in essence, a collaborative meaning-making process between the CYP, their teacher and the TR (Clark, 2011). To introduce participating CYP to mapping and to help them to become familiar with maps, as a means of recording experience, TRs used the *My Map Book* by Sara Fanelli and the *Map Art Lab* by Jill Berry and Linden McNeilly.

Engagement with these map books supported CYP in making meaning of the map-making activity. Walking tours were included as an optional data capture tool (Clark and Moss 2011). Following the mapping activity, TRs, where appropriate, invited the CYP and their teacher to accompany them on a walk around the school to see some of the places on their maps. The CYP, during the walking tour, assumed the role of expert with the TR observing, asking, listening and, most importantly learning, from the child. Where walking tours were facilitated, TRs had the option to capture the tour through a line drawing to support further conversation and to provide a visual representation of the tour. Figure 3.3 provides an overview of the steps involved in the participatory encounters with students, and Figure 3.4, the outcomes of these processes.

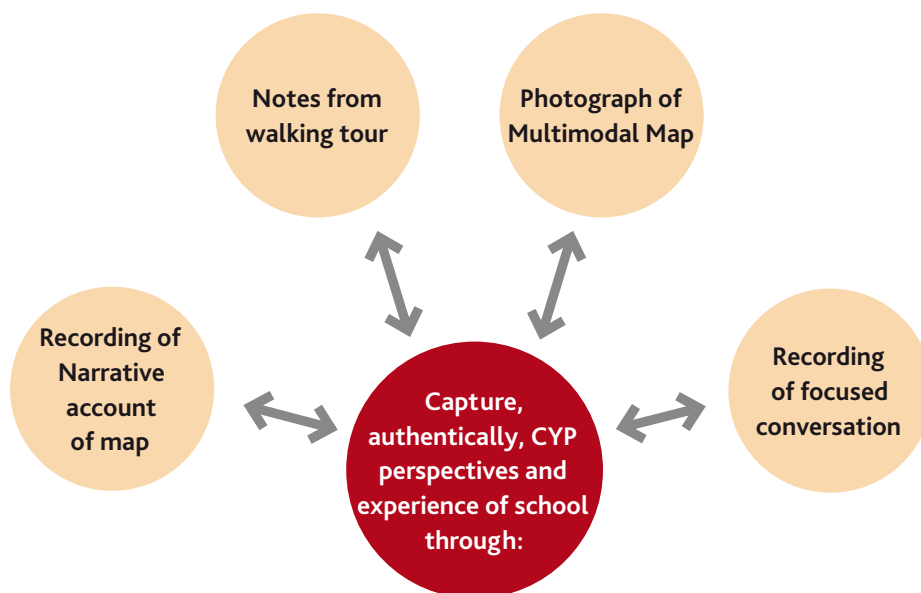
Figure 3.3: Steps in participatory encounters with CYP



As shown in Figure 3.3., the general overall steps include:

- introducing the map book
- making a map and optional figure
- talking about the map with the CYP
- engaging in a focused conversation about the school
- including an optional walking tour of the school.

The outputs from the participatory encounters with CYP included those in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Outputs from case studies with students**CYP Participatory Encounter: Data Collected**

As shown in Figure 3.4, data outputs included notes from the walking tour, the multimodal map itself (as an image), a recording of the focused conversation and (where appropriate) notes from a walking tour. The collection of this data was intended to capture the CYP's perspectives and experiences of school as authentically as possible. In addition to securing consent, TRs used scripts and visuals to support the process of assent with CYP participating in the case studies.

TRs used the data collected to complete two templates: a school case study template and a CYP case study template. The school case study template, which was based on the evidence collected from conversations with principals, teachers and parents/carers, evaluated:

- perspectives on NCSE frontline services
- what NCSE frontline services work well for CYP, parents/carers and schools, and why
- what NCSE frontline services do not work so well for CYP, parents/carers and schools, and why.

Based on the data collected, the CYP case study template evaluated:

- CYP identity and belonging in school.
- The role of school staff/other professionals/parents-carers
- The role of relationships with peers
- The role of the physical environment and resources.

The research team was responsible for quality checking the completed case study templates and for the final analysis of all case-study data.

Limitations

Although the study engaged almost 1,400 participants and was rigorously implemented to ensure trustworthiness in the transparency of the research, it is important to note that there are some limitations. Firstly, the survey was distributed to potential respondents via a link shared in a generic email or through online forums. It was not possible to distribute links to known individuals in the target population. This means that the team was unable to calculate response rates or estimate how far the respondent profile represented the profile of the target population and its subgroups (for example type of special educational need, region, age phases). Furthermore, weighted means could not be applied, and so sampling bias could not be corrected. However, the team can estimate that the school staff survey sample represents around 15 per cent of total schools in Ireland and so can be more confident about generalisability. It is important to note that the relatively large sample overall (1,377 stakeholders) enables a meaningful and valid account of service users' lived experience of the NCSE, and the team argues that the realities illuminated cannot (and should not) be dismissed.

The study gathers perception data. This data is of great value, and its validity and fit with the purposes of evaluation are not questioned here. However, the evaluation does not compare patterns of perception with objective, national measures of impact, such as enrolment, educational progression, attendance or attainment for pupils with SEN. It is important to note that comprehensive national measures of these phenomena are not available in Ireland in a national collated way other than state examination results, which are not disaggregated by SEN.

Summary

This section has provided a detailed account of the research design and the methods deployed to investigate the study's four RQs:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

The study took place between September 2022 and October 2023 and included a contextual review, an online survey of 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 33 stakeholders (parents/carers, NCSE staff, school staff) and detailed case studies of nine varied schools and nine children with SEN attending those schools. In total, the research engaged almost 1,400 (1,377) participants.

The purpose of this mixed- and multi-method approach was to ensure a broad and deep account of perceptions on several aspects of the frontline services provided by the NCSE. The methods were designed to elicit stakeholder perceptions of the quality of the frontline services provided by the NCSE, perceptions of their impact (for example on access to education, wellbeing and participation) and perceptions of relationships and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services. Analysis of the data will lead to an account of what is working well and what improvements could be made to ensure that the NCSE is positioned to deliver continuously high-quality and impactful services to its stakeholders.

The study also used an innovative approach to evaluation by engaging six TRs with research and practice expertise in SEN and inclusive practice. TRs were co-researchers in the evaluation team, leading on the collection and analysis of data in case studies of schools and students. There were two main reasons for engaging TRs as co-researchers. The first was to affirm their status as expert practitioner-researchers. The second was to benefit from their practice immersion and their capacity to perceive phenomena of interest in a school context. Their skills in working with students with SEN were also vital to the student-centred, ethnographic mapping method used to elicit students' own perceptions of their inclusion in school.

Analysis of the survey data was descriptive rather than analytic for the most part, due to the small base sizes for subgroup. This created some limitations for hypothesis-testing and generalisability to the population as (a) the team could not calculate the response rate from the total population or from subgroups within that population (for example parents/carers of children with ASD, schools with DEI status) and (b) analytic reporting of significant differences between subgroups could not be done reliably for many items in the questionnaire because weighted means could not be applied (meaning that the survey could not be corrected for sampling bias).

Analysis of qualitative data deployed thematic analysis that began inductively. Inductive coding led to the development of a coding frame that was then applied across the qualitative data set (interviews and case studies). The process deployed both semantic and latent analysis.

The next section explains how the findings were reported and identifies the themes and subthemes identified from the thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

4. Introduction to findings

This section introduces the findings of this evaluation. Findings are reported in Sections 6 to 8 of this report, with Section 9 providing a summary and conclusion. The themes and subthemes identified during the thematic analysis of the data are introduced, and their content summarised in brief. This introduction also outlines the links between the thematic structure and the four RQs for the study.

Reporting of the findings

In Sections 6 to 8, findings are reported under the four themes and 10 subthemes developed from the analysis of the data. Where relevant, quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys are reported alongside thematic data from interviews and case studies. This is to ensure that the rich and multi-modal data arising from the research design is used to the best effect. Specifically, this provides a broad evidence base for claims and produces a rich and complex picture of what has been discovered. Extracts from the raw data (for example, quotations from interviews or images produced in case studies of pupils) are used to illustrate and evidence the themes that were identified in the analysis.

Magnitude descriptors

Before analysing and reporting on themes and subthemes, the research team established magnitude descriptors that could be used to describe the proportion of participants in a sample communicating a particular experience or perception. This ensures that reporting is consistent across data sets and modalities, and that readers can put the findings into context. The magnitude descriptors used are summarised in table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Summary of magnitude descriptors used in findings

Term	Percentage of a sample	Example (n) in qualitative data
All	100%	All interviews in the sample
Most	76% to 99%	If 12 interviewees, n=9
Majority	51% to 75%	If 12 interviewees, n=7 or 8 ('many' is also used)
Some	25% to 50%	If 12 interviewees, n=4,5,6
A minority	Less than 25%.	If 12 interviewees, n=3 ('a few' is also used)
Very few	One or two respondents/participants only	

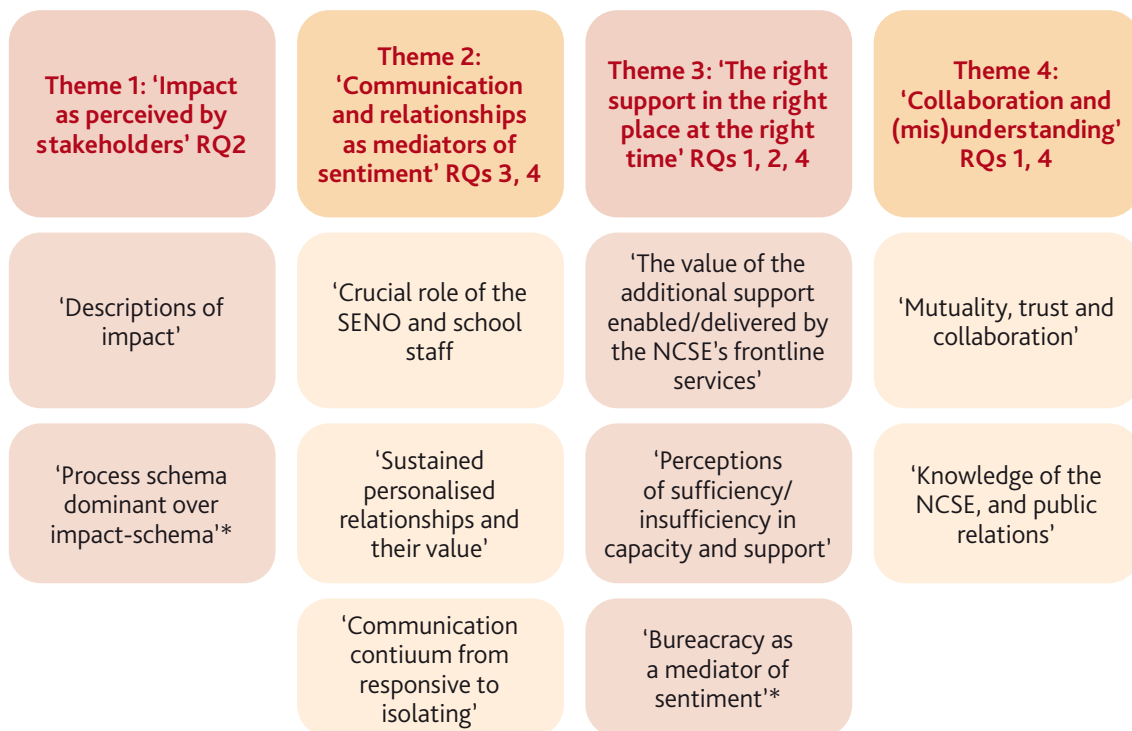
Comparing frontline services

It is important to note that though survey findings include service-user perceptions of the quality, value and impact of different frontline services (such as the VTS and SENO support for exceptional reviews), the services are very different in their remit and engage with parent/carers and school communities in very different ways. This means that findings must not be interpreted as direct comparisons of quality across these services. The intention of the evaluation is not to compare services, nor to identify those that are working best or worst, but to understand service-user perceptions of NCSE frontline services at a more general level in order to inform workforce development and deployment across the NCCE's continuum of provision.

Themes produced from the analysis of the qualitative data

A process of rigorous and cross-checked thematic analysis that was first inductive and then deductive (deductive meaning that a common coding frame was deployed) was applied to the qualitative data (in-depth interviews and case studies). This resulted in the identification of four themes, each with several subthemes. Figure 4.1 illustrates the thematic structure identified during data analysis; where a theme or subtheme is identified as a 'phenomenon of interest', its text is italicised to indicate that it has been derived from a process of latent analysis and is considered relevant to understanding the impact of NCSE frontline services within the lived experience of service users, even where this phenomenon was not named as such by participants themselves.

Figure 4.1: Summary of thematic structure: Major themes and subthemes



*Arising from latent analysis

Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders' contains data related to 'Descriptions of impact' (subtheme) and 'Process schema dominant over impact-schema' (subtheme). This data includes participants' descriptions of the impact, for example, on staff confidence, children's wellbeing and access to education. A phenomenon of interest to the study is also represented in this data. Specifically, the tendency of participants to focus on their experiences of *process* (for example applications) in more detail and for more time than the *impact* of a service on staff, families or students. Findings in this theme are relevant to the following RQ:

- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'

Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment' contains data that illustrates how participants' experiences of interacting with the NCSE are relevant to their perception of the organisation and its frontline services as well as their view of the quality and impact of these services and how this could improve. There are three subthemes: the 'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff', the value of 'Sustained personalised relationships' and experiences along a 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating'. Findings in this theme are relevant to the following RQs:

- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time' contains data demonstrating participants' perception of the value of additional support for schools, pupils and families delivered by the NCSE's frontline services. Data in the subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support' contains varied views on the resources available in the system and the potentialities and restrictions thereof. The subtheme 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment' is a phenomenon of interest and contains participants' descriptions of the ease or difficulties they encounter when making applications for support.

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding' contains accounts of how participants perceive 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration' (subtheme) to be a resource that improves (or can improve) both satisfaction and impact. The subtheme 'Knowledge of the NCSE and public relations' contains similar content, but here there is some evidence that participants have limited knowledge of the NCSE and its remit or that they propose public relations as a task that the NCSE might prioritise to improve perceptions of frontline services.

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Summary

This section has explained how the findings are reported and what is meant by descriptors like 'all', 'most', 'majority'. For example, when using the term 'majority' in our reporting of quantitative data, we are referring to 51 per cent to 75 per cent of respondents, and for qualitative data, over half of the total sample (for example where there were 12 participants in an interview cohort, seven would be reported as a majority).

Analysis of the qualitative data has led to the formation of four major themes:

- Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders'
- Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment'
- Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time'
- Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'.

The team mapped survey findings to these themes to enable a cohesive reporting of findings and phenomena of interest, and to ensure that the full quota of evidence related to a theme was aggregated. Following careful analysis and review, researchers only identified data content from the surveys that fitted comfortably within the thematic structure already theorised during thematic analysis.

The next section reports on the findings for Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders'.

5. Findings – Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders'

This section reports on the findings contained in Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders', which comprises two subthemes: 'Descriptions of impact' and 'Process schema dominant over impact-schema'. This data includes participants' descriptions of the impact, for example, on staff confidence, children's wellbeing and inclusion. A phenomenon of interest to the study is also represented in this data. Specifically, the participants tended to focus on their experiences of process (for example applications) and interactions with service providers or operational activities in more detail and for more time than on the impact of a service on staff, families or students. Findings in this theme are relevant to the following RQs:

- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'

Across the data and with some variability, there is evidence that most parents/carers and NCSE staff perceived that NCSE frontline services as delivering a positive impact. This is also the case for some (though not a majority) of school staff. As noted above, the subtheme of 'Process schema as dominant over impact schema' is also contained in the data. This is relevant to contextualising impact as a concept that operates less perceptibly in the lived experience of participants.

In this section, the following data is used:

Quantitative data from the survey of parents/carers and school staff. Descriptive statistics from the survey are presented in tables and graphs to provide a clear and concise overview of the results and are accompanied by summaries and interpretations. Where relevant, respondents' free-text entries are quoted to illustrate the recurrent topics and perspectives shared by service users. Relevant to Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders'. Direct quotations are labelled to indicate whether the text was provided by a parent/carer, a school leader (principal/deputy principal) or a teacher (class teacher, SET teacher). When referring to free text from surveys, it is ensured that these responses reflect the perspectives of various respondents. This evaluation prevents reporting multiple free-text contributions from the same individual to ensure a wide representation of views, while identifying common patterns in those views.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff/associates is referred to in this section, along with data sourced from case studies. This is presented in a narrative format supported by excerpts and quotations. In keeping with this narrative approach, vignettes from the case-study data are presented as illustrations of how themes were active in context (school) for an individual learner with SEN.

Subtheme: 'Descriptions of impact'

The data content for this subtheme contains participants' perspectives on the impact of the NCCE's frontline services.

Subtheme: 'Descriptions of impact': online survey of parents/carers

In the online survey of parents/carers (Figure 5.2), a small majority of respondents (52 per cent) reported that the SENO had supported them and their child 'well'. Around one in eight (16 per cent) said that they had done so 'very well'. However, around four in 10 (42 per cent) did not feel that the SENO had supported them and their child, while a fifth (21 per cent) said that they had not supported them 'at all well'. The remainder (6 per cent) were undecided.

Figure 5.2: How well the SENO has supported parent/carer and child

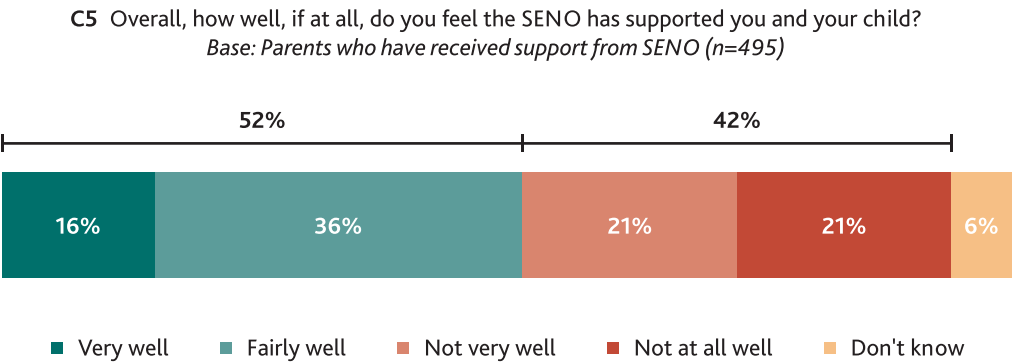
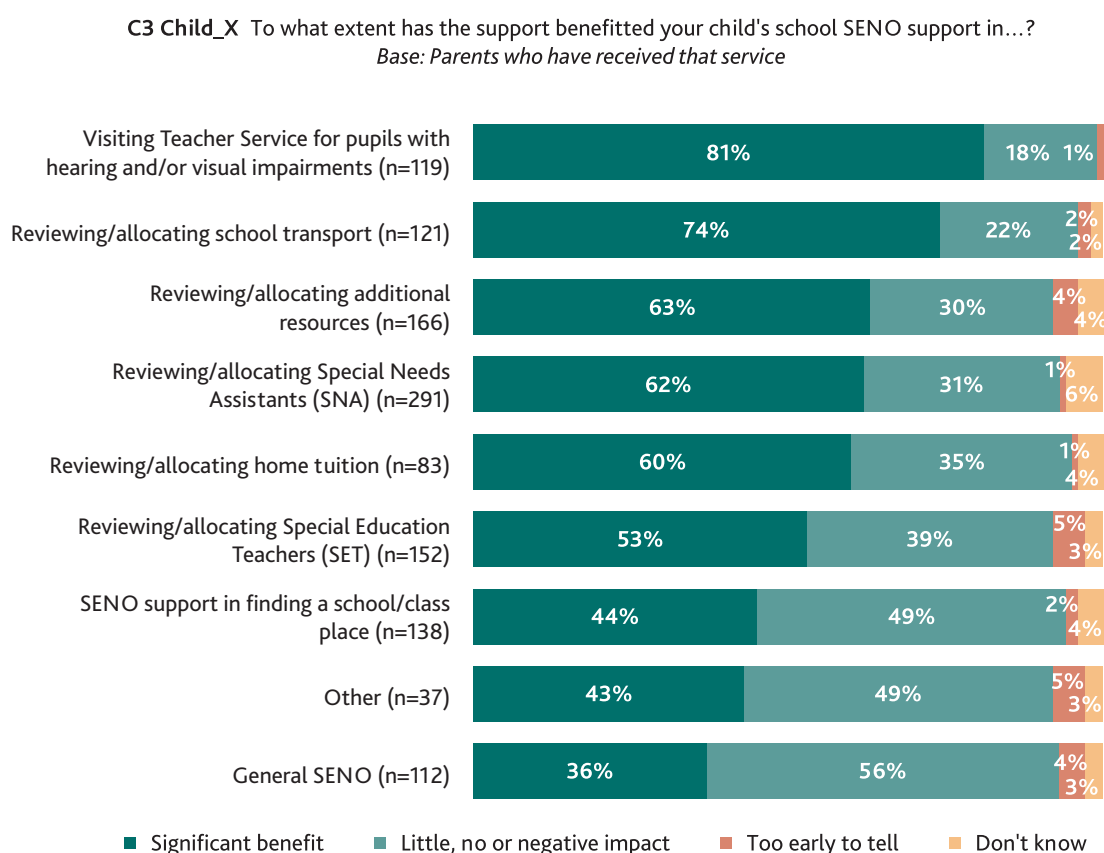


Figure 5.3: Perceived benefit of services for child⁸

Most parents/carers (81 per cent) reported that the VTS provided a significant benefit for their child (Figure 5.3). In addition, identified as positively impactful were 'reviewing transport' (74 per cent), 'reviewing/allocating additional resources' (63 per cent) and 'reviewing/allocating SNAs' (62 per cent). However, it is not clear whether parents/carers were referring to existing staffing allocations (as defined within the allocation model) or allocations made because of an exceptional review. Across these measures, very few parents/carers reported that it was too early to tell if there were any benefits. This suggests that they felt they had had adequate experience of the services to be able to assess the benefits they brought. As with the benefits for the child, the VTS was the most likely service to have provided a significant benefit (71 per cent) to parents/carers with 'review of transport' in second place (69 per cent). 'Reviewing/allocating HT' also scored highly (60 per cent). A total of 43 per cent of respondents named 'other' support from the frontline services as having significant benefit (such as assistive technology, identifying the right school for the child, summer provision, supporting a NEPS assessment, toilet training support, dealing with a complaint, help with school-based anxiety). In general, parents/carers were less likely to report that services had benefitted them or other parents than to say that services had benefitted their child (Figure 5.4).

⁸ Respondents were asked whether services had benefitted a great deal, a fair amount, just a little, not at all, if it was too early to say, or if there was a negative impact. For ease of reporting, little impact, no impact or negative impact answers were collated in this question to show a binary difference between where different modes of support were making a difference or not.

Figure 5.4: Perceived benefit of services for parents/carers

C3 School_X To what extent has the support benefitted your child's school SENO support in...?
 Base: Parents who have received that service

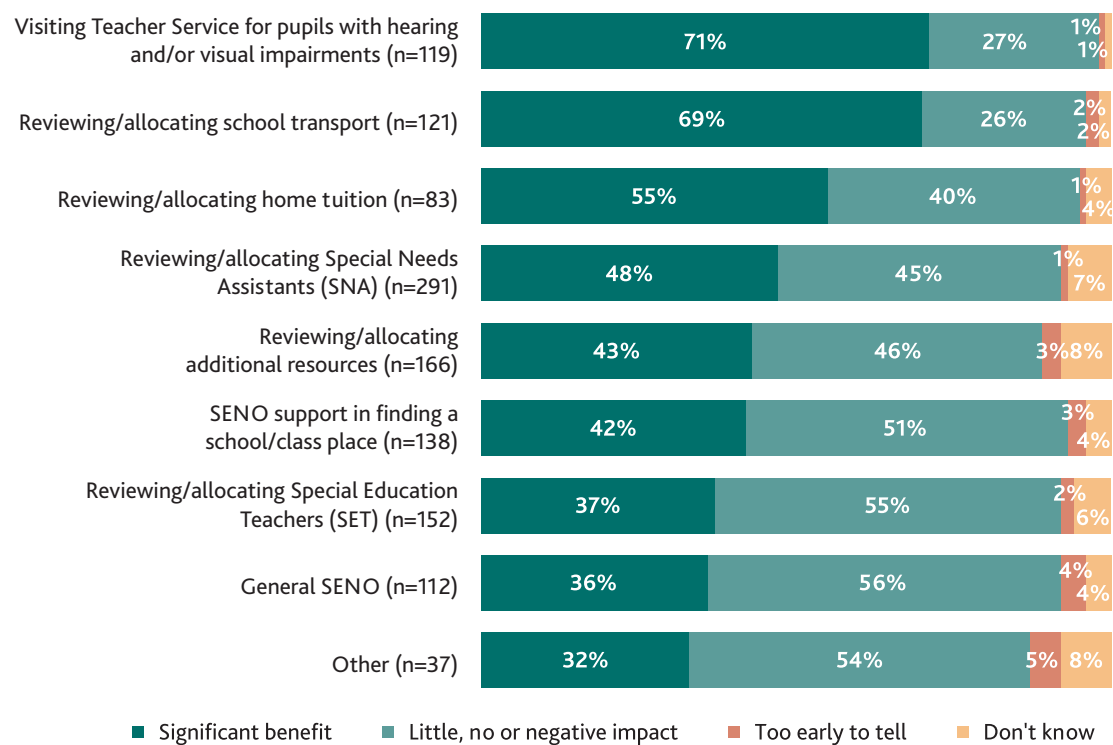
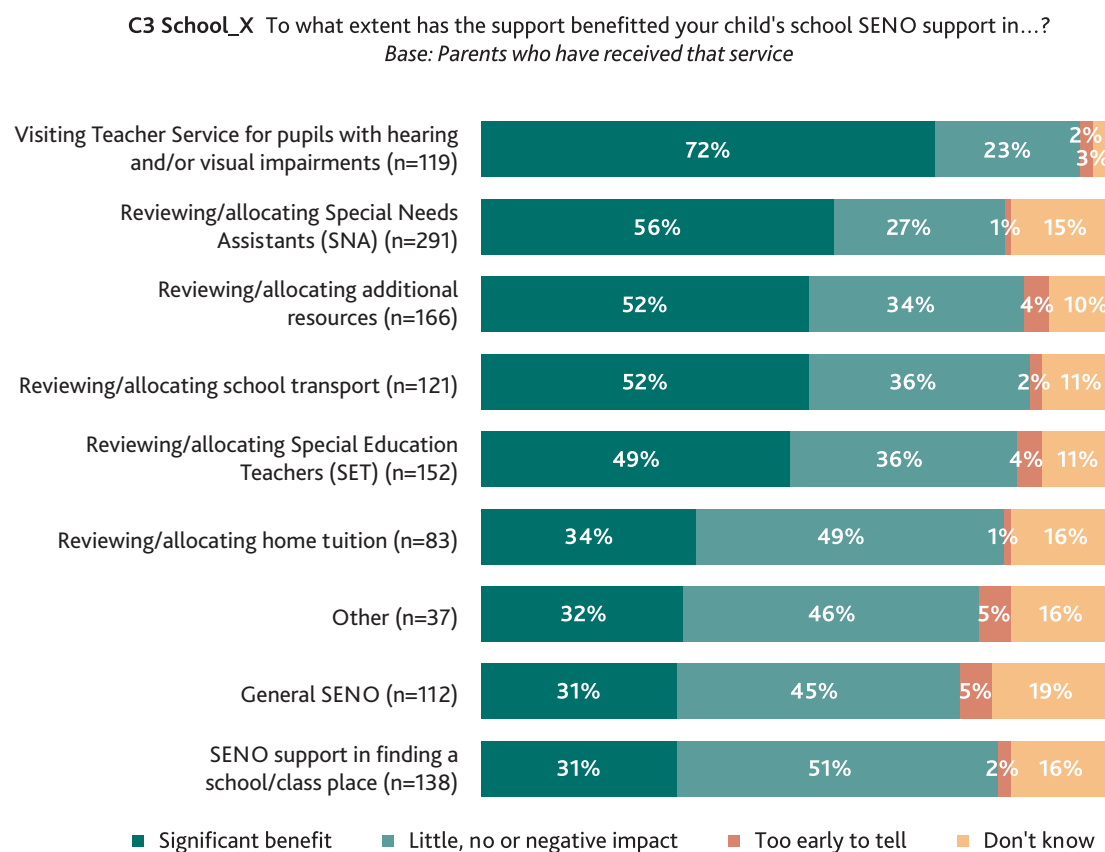


Figure 5.5: Perceived benefit of services for school (as perceived by parents/carers)

The extent to which these services have benefitted schools followed a similar pattern (Figure 5.5). Seven out of 10 (71 per cent) indicated that the VTS has a significant benefit. Well over half (56 per cent) thought that 'reviewing/allocating SNAs' had a significant benefit to the school. Around half (52 per cent) thought there was a significant benefit from 'reviewing/allocating additional resources' and 'reviewing/allocating school transport'. However, it is not clear whether parents/carers were evaluating existing allocations (as defined within the allocation model) or allocations made because of an exceptional review. It is important to note that a majority of parents/carers were reporting that the following services were delivering little, no or negative benefits for their child or their child's school:

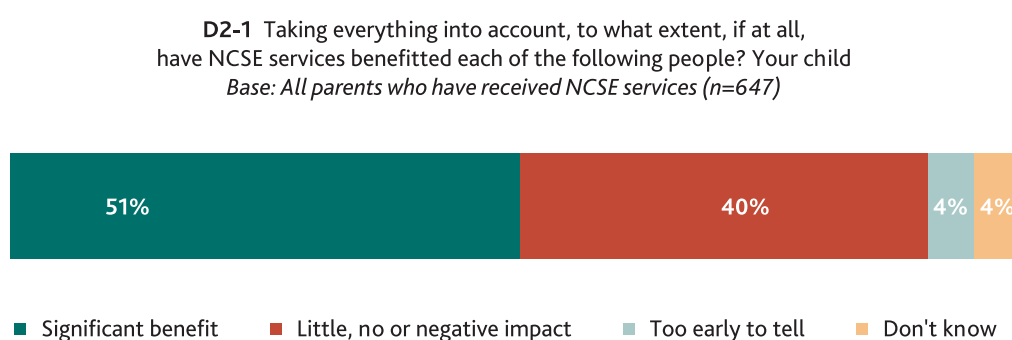
- reviewing/allocating SNAs
- reviewing/allocating additional resources
- receiving SENO support in finding a school/class place
- reviewing SETs
- receiving general SENO support
- other.

There was a variety of responses under 'other', including:

- NEPS assessment (6 responses)
- assistive technology (2 responses)
- help with school-based anxiety (2 responses)
- support in identifying right school for child
- summer provision
- whole-school resource (not child specific)
- support with wider challenges in school
- dealing with a complaint
- equipment for classroom
- signing forms for home tuition/approving HT hours
- toilet-training support.

A small majority of respondents (51 per cent) felt that NCSE frontline services provided a significant benefit to their child, but for a minority (22 per cent) there was only a small benefit, for 13 per cent there was no benefit, for 4 per cent it was too early to tell, and for 4 per cent it had a negative impact (Figure 5.6). This means that a significant minority (17 per cent) were reporting no or negative impact.

Figure 5.6: Overall benefit to child



There were several common themes in the survey's free-text responses about impacts. These included: access to education, educational progress, social benefits, feelings of security for the child and the parent/carer, and improved wellbeing. These are explored in more detail below.

Access to education

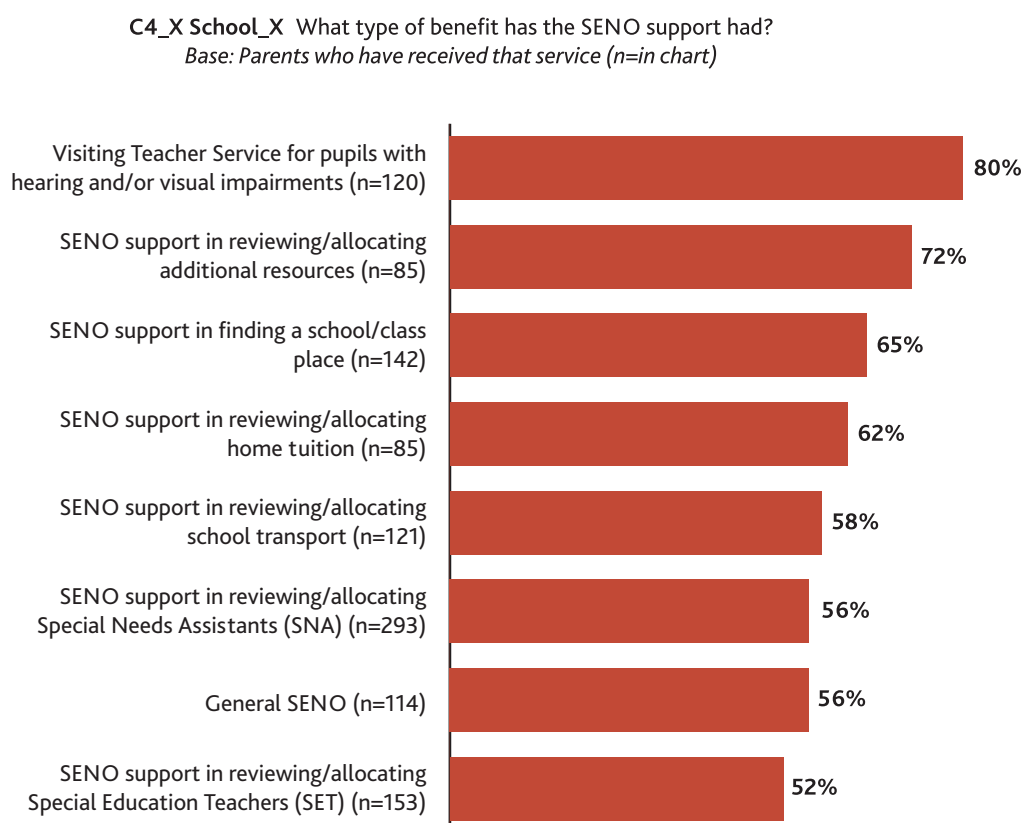
Many parents/carers felt that the services provided by NCSE had granted or improved their child's access to education. Some expressed gratitude that their child was now able to access the curriculum and had seen a positive response from their child as a result.

He is happier and doing much better because he is now able to access the curriculum more successfully. (Parent/carer)

Some parents/carers felt that they were supported in providing pre-school education to help prepare their child for school. Others thought that accessing education helped their child's development and helped them to feel more included with the added social benefits that it brings. Figure 5.7 shows the services that parents/carers felt were helpful in getting their child to access education. Most parents/carers (80 per cent) thought that the VTS had a positive impact in helping their child to access education. One parent/carer commented on how the VT had helped to ensure that their child accessed the core curriculum, in particular.

[The] Visiting Teacher Service was great support with my second child she has worked to extend core curriculum for holding the school accountable and making them go a little deeper. (Parent/carer)

Nearly three-quarters (a large majority, 72 per cent) of parents/carers who had received support from a SENO felt that the SENO reviewing/allocating additional resources had helped with access to education. These resources could be assistive technology such as computers or the use of Braille. There were several mentions of the positive impact of accessible books.

Figure 5.7: Service that led to improved access to education

About two-thirds (65 per cent) of parents/carers thought that the support they received from SENOs in finding a school class or place had directly impacted their child's access to education. A similar percentage (62 per cent) thought HT had improved this access. Transport was crucial for many in enabling their child to access education; well over half (58 per cent) suggested that transport provision had benefited their child.

My child would never have been able to access mainstream education without access to transport, as school in local area has no special class. (Parent/carer)

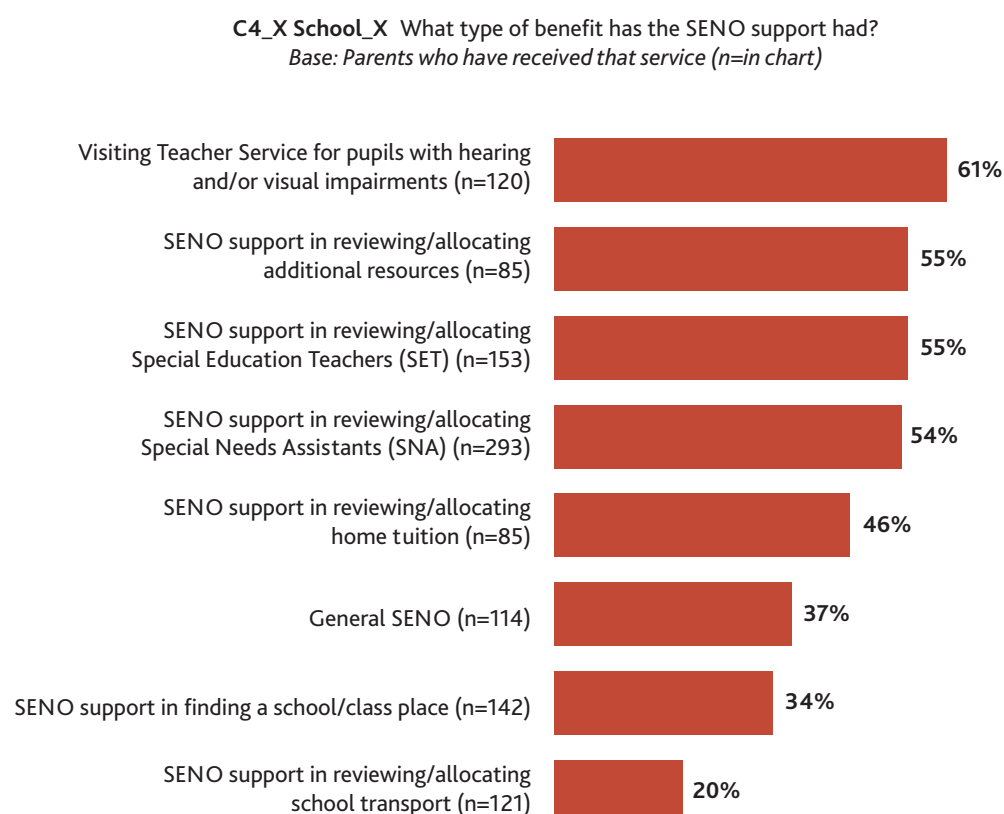
Some parents reported that a combination of factors was important and felt that there was no one key factor that enabled their child to access education.

The grant of home tuition when required, grant of school transport when required, hearing about new classes opening in our area and being able to get on lists quickly, getting advice on rights for my child – all that ensured my son had access to an education even though he was not in school and that he got a suitable school place at the earliest possible time, which helps him immensely. (Parent/carer)

Improved educational progress

Stemming from an improved access to education, some parents also reported improved educational progress for their children. Figure 5.8 shows the services that they felt had contributed to this.

Figure 5.8: Service that led to improved educational progress



Again, the VTS was the most cited frontline service for providing a benefit in terms of improved educational progress: 61 per cent of parents/carers said it had helped in this regard. Just over half (55 per cent) of parents/carers thought that support in viewing/allocating additional resources had helped their child to progress educationally. Similarly, the majority indicated that 'reviewing/allocating SETs' and 'reviewing/allocating SNAs' had helped (55 per cent and 54 per cent respectively).

The support of an SNA is vital, without one we would not have had the progress we are experiencing now – both socially and academically. My child had a hearing impairment when she was starting school and the surround sound was installed in the classroom – this was a great support for both her, teacher and SNA. (Parent/carer)

Social benefits and inclusion

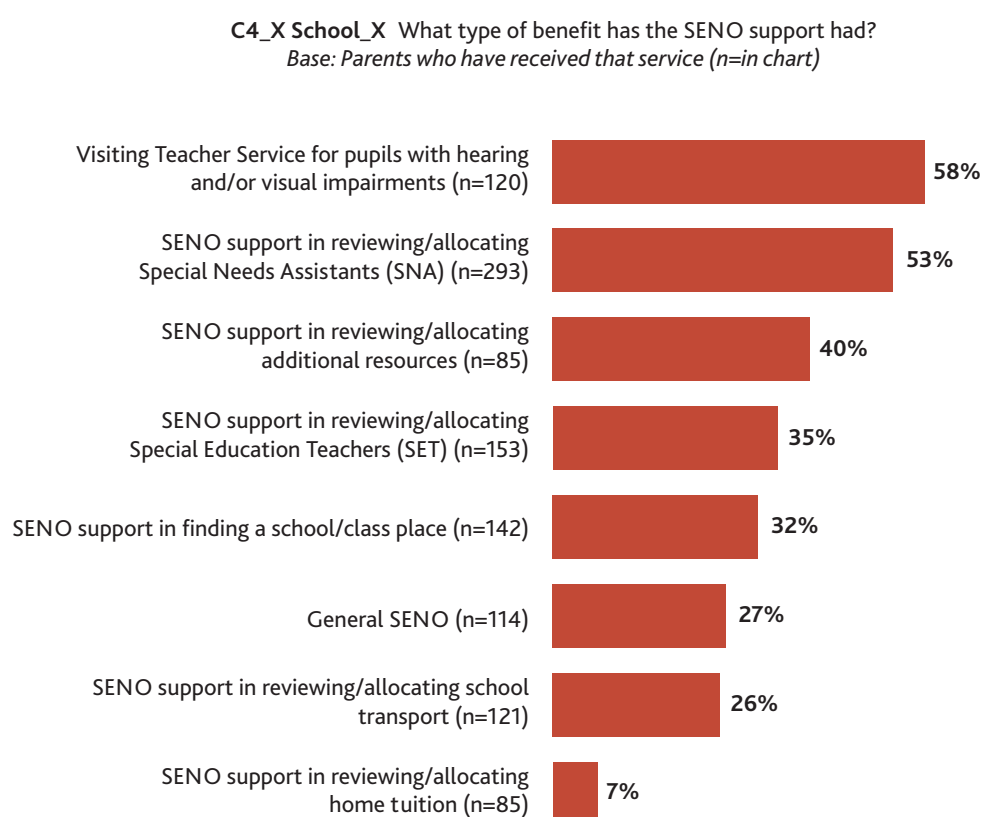
Several parents/carers thought that inclusion and being able to spend time with other children was a positive outcome from the impact of NCSE frontline services. In some cases, being in a mainstream school has been beneficial for the child and had helped to improve communication skills and speech as well as confidence and social skills.

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)

[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)

The majority of parents/carers reported that the VTS helped to achieve improved inclusion and that the review/allocation of SNAs served this purpose (58 per cent and 53 per cent respectively: Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9: Service that led to improved inclusion



Many parents/carers referred specifically to movement breaks as a reason why their child was able to attend and be part of mainstream classes and this emerged as an example of an adaption that made a difference:

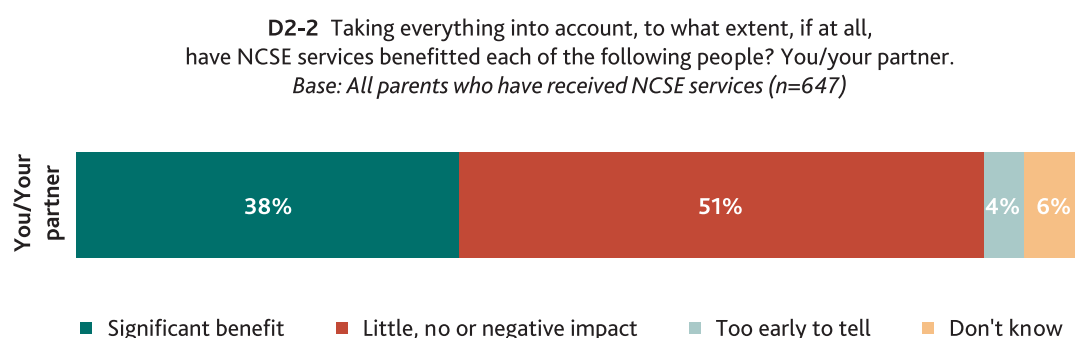
She looks forward to the 5-to-10-minute movement break. She needs it to help in some way to stay focused and concentrated. It helps to stop her getting overwhelmed and getting uneasy.
(Parent/carer)

However, there were some areas where parents perceived relatively limited impacts on inclusion. Only around a quarter of parents (27 per cent) thought that general SENO support led to improved inclusion, and a similar proportion (26 per cent) thought SENO reviewing of school transportation led to improved inclusion. Just 7 per cent thought that SENO reviewing or allocating HT led to greater inclusion.

Reassurance, security and wellbeing

A smaller proportion of parents felt that NCSE services had made a positive impact on them or their partner than to their child, but 38 per cent reported it had a significant benefit – either a great deal or a fair amount for them. However, 19 per cent felt that it had little impact, 24 per cent felt it had no impact and 9 per cent felt it had had a negative impact, while 4 per cent felt it was too early to say (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10: Overall benefit to parent(s)/carer(s)



In general, parents/carers reported the main benefit of NCSE frontline services was peace of mind and lowered stress levels. Where there was effective review and allocation of resources, parents/carers were reassured that their child was safe, their development was in hand, and that they were not in danger of falling behind.

We are less stressed about our son's education, not worried he is being excluded from education or failed by us. (Parent/carer)

We know our child is safe and not in a constant state of fear for the child's safety. (Parent/carer)

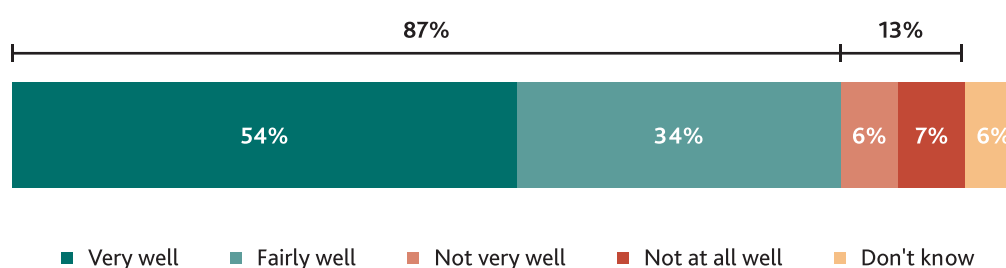
Parents/carers especially praised the VTS for offering this support and peace of mind. This service was most referred to in complimentary terms across the open-ended questions.

Our visiting teacher has been outstanding, especially when my daughter was first diagnosed, as I was completely clueless how to help her and access any services for her. Every child needs a visiting teacher in their corner to help them as a parent [it] is very overwhelming to always to be struggling to navigate the school system. (Parent/carers)

This service was reflected well in the survey. Most (87 per cent) parents/carers reported that the VT has supported them and their child well. A majority (54 per cent) said that they did so very well. However, 13 per cent of parents felt that support from the VT did not work well, with 7 per cent reporting that it did not work at all well. (Figure 5.11).

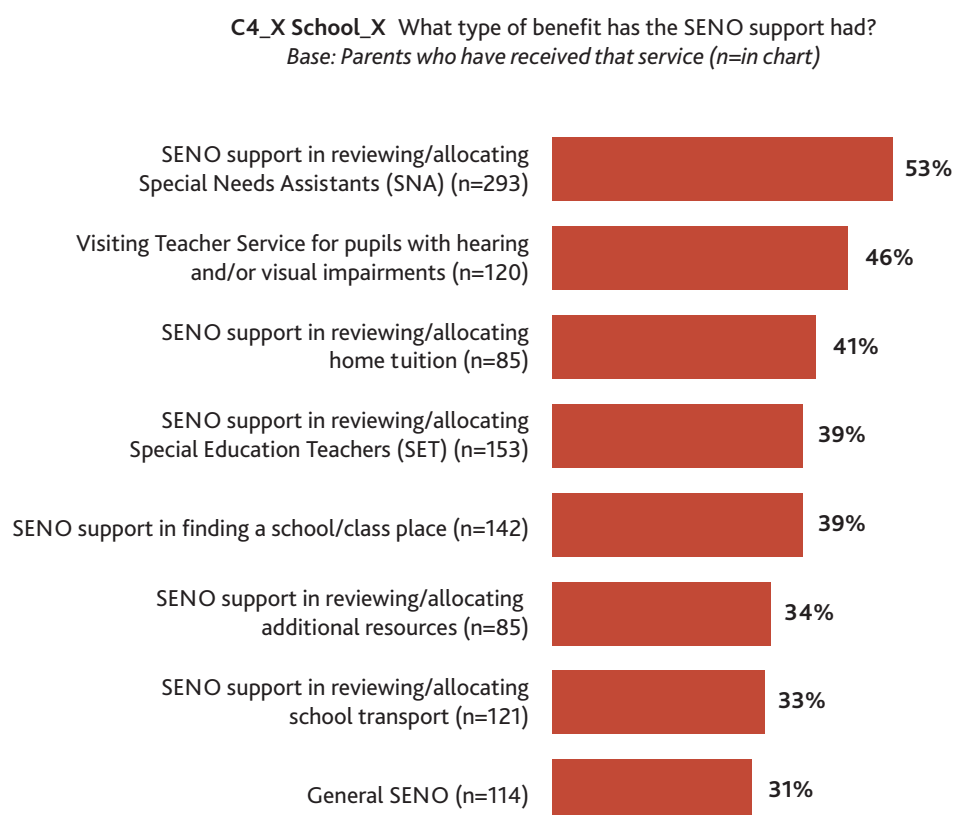
Figure 5.11: Support from Visiting Teacher (VT)

C6 Overall, how well, if at all, do you feel the Visiting Teacher has supported you and your child?
Base: All parents who have received support from a Visiting Teacher (n=119)



In relation to improved wellbeing, the VTS helped to improve the child's wellbeing for nearly half (46 per cent) of parents/carers (Figure 5.12). Some (41 per cent) thought that reviewing/allocating HT created a significant benefit in this regard. With the improvement in the child's wellbeing, parents/carers reported that they were able to give other members of the family more time and attention. The majority of parents/carers (55 per cent) saw the support given by SENOs in allocating SNA support as impacting positively on wellbeing.

My other two children were neglected for two years as all our energy and time went into our daughter trying to regulate her and calm her down after school. Our family life dramatically changed when NCSE provided the essential supports their sister desperately needed. (Parent/carers)

Figure 5.12: Services that led to improved wellbeing

Developing knowledge for parents/carers

Parents/carers also felt that the NCSE services helped them to better understand their child's needs. In addition to helping them to navigate certain systems and to be able to advocate for their child, they felt that they were able to understand their child's needs more fully and, as a result, form a better relationship and improve family life.

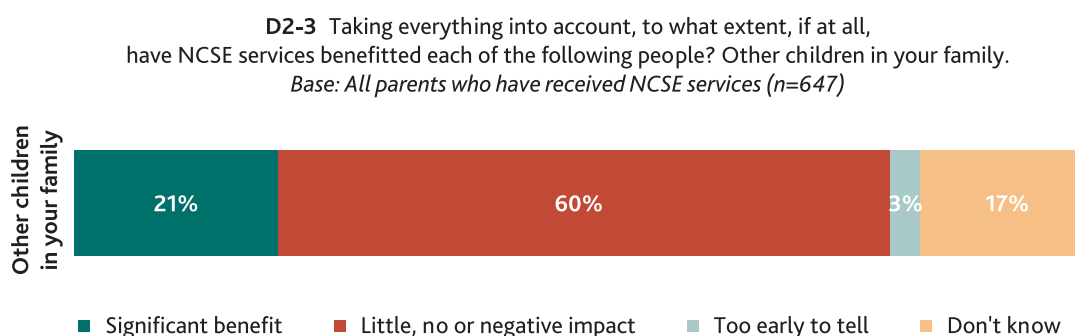
The home tuition benefited us so much as a family. We were able to have a tutor here to help us with toilet training, introducing learning play skills – it was having education for my son but also for us to learn too. (Parent/carer)

[It's] given us more knowledge on how to better understand our child and how to listen properly to what she may or may not be saying or what she is asking for. (Parent/carer)

Wellbeing to all the family

Only a fifth of parents/carers felt that services had made a positive impact on other children in the family (21 per cent). A higher proportion had seen no impact (43 per cent), 12% saw little benefit, 3 per cent thought it was too early to say, and 5 per cent thought the impact had been negative, as shown in Figure 5.13.

Figure 5.13: Overall benefit to other children in the family

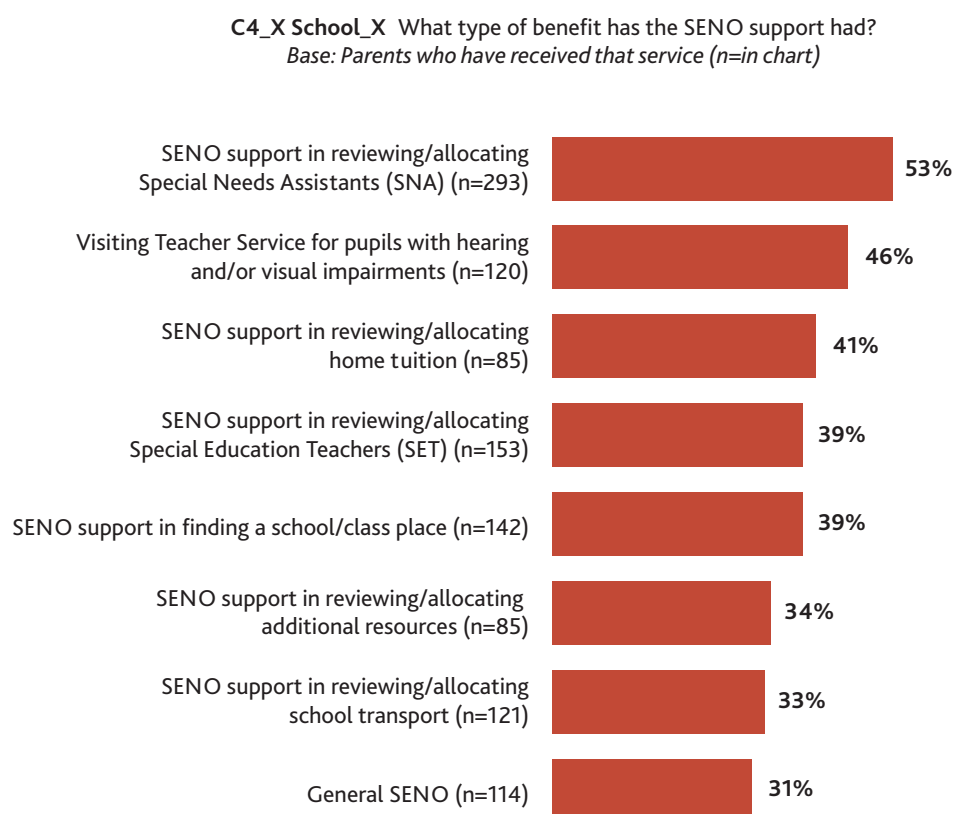


Those who did see a significant benefit to other children in the family attributed this to a calmer home environment. This was often due to improved communication with their child, which reduced frustration and the number of emotional outbursts, and hence the impact on home.

Our home life has massively improved as our daughter is not in constant meltdown after being in mainstream school with inappropriate supports. (Parent/carer)

My child has made huge progress in his speech and language, his communication skills and general behaviour due to getting a place in an Early Intervention Pre-school. This means he can communicate better at home and is easier to manage. (Parent/carer)

In general, the improved wellbeing of the child being supported by NCSE had a knock-on effect of improving the wellbeing of the rest of the family. Figure 5.14 shows the services that parents/carers thought had had a positive impact on the wellbeing of their child.

Figure 5.14: Services that led to improved wellbeing

The review/allocation of SNAs were the most likely service to improve a child's wellbeing. Just over half (53 per cent) of parents/carers thought it had a significant benefit to their child's wellbeing.

Access to an SNA is the difference between my children thriving in school and ticking a box. The SNAs have enabled my child's confidence, built up their resilience and coping mechanisms, made them feel more normal in a classroom setting and not outsiders. (Parent/carer)

A special school is inclusion at its best. The level of inclusion, everything that is going on in that school we are involved with, they (the child) are involved with. (Parent/carer)

Subtheme: 'Descriptions of impact': online survey of school staff

In the survey of school staff, only some of the respondents felt that NCSE services and resources had benefited their school across the measured aspects (Figure 5.15). Slightly over a third (36 per cent) thought they benefited their schools' methods and processes in respect of special educational practice, 34 per cent thought they benefited their school's confidence working with children with SEN; and 32 per cent reported that their school's methods and processes in the respect of inclusive practice had benefited.

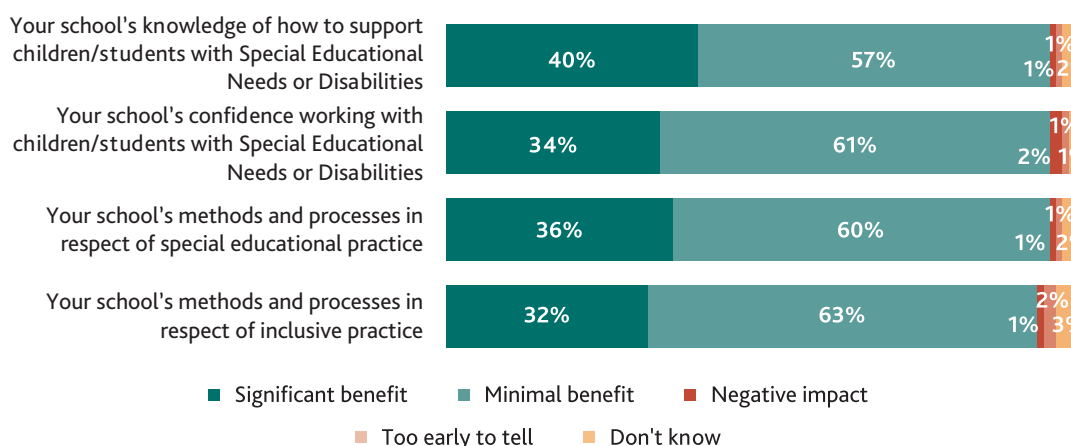
Larger schools were significantly more likely to think NCSE frontline services benefited their school's knowledge of how to support children/students with SEN or disabilities. Fifty-one per cent of schools with 501 to 1,000 students agreed with this statement, as did 55 per cent of schools with 1001 or more students compared with the overall figure of 40 per cent.

Larger schools were also more likely to agree that there were benefits in gaining confidence to support children/students. Notably, 45 per cent of schools with 501 to 1,001 pupils and 45 per cent of schools with 1,001 or more pupils agreed compared with the overall figure of 34 per cent. Those teaching a post-primary age range were also more likely to see a positive impact in this regard with 44 per cent agreeing.

This pattern was consistent in terms of perceiving benefits from the school's methods and processes related to special educational and inclusive practices. Larger schools and those teaching post-primary students were more likely to report these benefits, with their scores being 9 to 10 percent higher than the average. The reasons for these differences remain unclear.

Figure 5.15: Benefits of NCSE service and resource to schools

D1-X Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, do you think the NCSE service and resources have benefited the following aspects for you and your school?
(Base: All staff who have had dealings with the NCSE, n=544)

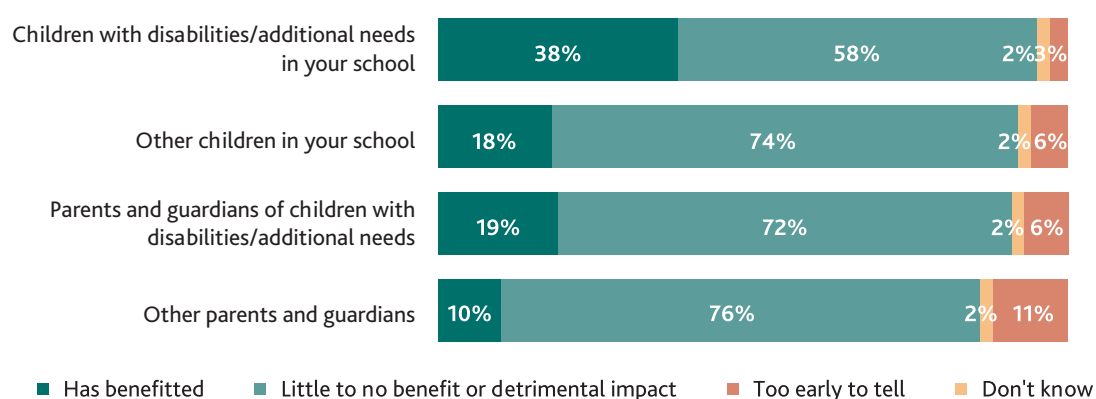


Fewer than half the staff felt that each of these resources had benefits to the schools. Nearly three fifths (58 per cent) felt that they had no benefit or a detrimental impact on their knowledge on how to support pupils with SEN, 62 per cent felt the same way about their school's confidence in working with pupils with SEN, 61 per cent felt the same about their school's methods and processes in respect of special educational practice, and 65 per cent felt there was no benefit or detrimental impact in their schools and processes in respect of inclusive practice.

An overall benefit to different groups from NCSE service and resources was perceived by some respondents. Some (38 per cent) saw benefits to children with disabilities or additional needs in the school, and most saw little to no benefit or a detrimental impact on other children in the school (74 per cent); on parents or guardians of children with disabilities or additional needs in the school (72 per cent); and on other parents and guardians (76 per cent) (Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16: Benefits of NCSE service and resource to different groups

D2 Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, do you think the NCSE service and resources have benefited the children/students and parents/carers at your school?
(Base: All staff who have had dealings with the NCSE, n=544)



Subtheme: 'Descriptions of impact' in the qualitative data

In the case studies, the data contained positive accounts of impact from school staff. The majority described the positive impact of TPL opportunities on the quality of their teaching and on their capacity to respond to children's individual learning needs. One SET reflected that from engaging in TPL provided by the NCSE, they had:

... been given more knowledge and awareness of specific needs from the NCSE and their help and guidelines. (Teacher, special school)

School staff participating in the case studies spoke positively in relation to:

- courses delivered by the Middletown Centre for Autism
- courses on managing behaviour and supporting emotional development.
- courses on bullying
- courses on teaching strategies and approaches
- courses on the SCERTS® (Social Communication; Emotional Regulation' Transactional Support) model.

Not all these courses are provided by the NCSE, but generally, perceptions of the impact of TPL were positive. The perception by some participants that engagement in TPL enabled school staff to cascade their learning to colleagues across the school was notable. Impact was perceived to be less positive when TPL was generic rather than specifically targeted to the schools' contexts (that is, more targeted at primary rather than post-primary level or at mainstream rather than special schools). A number of SNAs perceived that there was a lack of NCSE TPL specifically designed for them, but this may be because they had not yet engaged in the national SNA training programme launched in 2021.

*NCSE services are more geared to the teaching staff rather than the SNA staff
(SNA, special school)*

School staff also perceived that the NCSE advisory service impacted positively on their teaching and on students' educational experience. In one case study, for example, staff acknowledged the pivotal role of the advisory service in supporting them to: implement a continuum of support; effectively deploy SETs; and establish a special education team in the school. Data from the case studies also suggests that the support from the advisory services impacts on staff confidence as it functions to affirm good practice. Another school described the benefits of clinics for teachers that were organised by the advisory service in the school.

Across the case studies, the impact of the additional resources allocated through interaction with an NCSE frontline service was frequently articulated. NSCE staff working with the school had enabled students with SEN to access iPads, laptops, reading pins, online communication software and assistive technology. One principal commented on the impact of additional resources:

[The technology] had impacted positively on that child's learning experience every day and him being able to access his curriculum. (Principal, mainstream post-primary)

One student and their parent/carer saw ICT resources as being less impactful, the student articulating a preference for working with a laptop purchased privately rather than the iPad they were provided with:

I find it easier to type. I find it easier to use a laptop. (Student, mainstream primary school)

As is described in findings relating to Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time', impact was often perceived as negative when applications for additional resources were not successful.

The impact on practice of the NCSE website was also acknowledged by participants in the case-study schools. School staff had accessed a range of resources on the website to support planning; differentiation; engagement with parents/carers; and the development of school policies. Similarly, participants acknowledged the impact of special transport in allowing students to access school. In one school, the majority of students attending used the school transport service.

In the case-study schools, the majority of participants acknowledged the impact of staff support on teaching and learning. One parent/carer noted that their child was able to increase from a reduced to a full school day and 'went from strength to strength' because of an exceptional teaching post approved by the NCSE. While parents/carers were not familiar with all aspects of the supports provided by the NCSE, they affirmed the value of SNA support. All parents/carers described SNA support as having a positive impact on their child(ren)'s school experience in supporting their child(ren)'s curriculum access; reducing anxiety; contributing to their growth in confidence; and enabling positive transitions both throughout the school day and across primary-post-primary levels. The responses are encapsulated by a parent/carer of a post-primary student who attributed her child's 'growth in confidence' to the 'incredible help and support' she had received in navigating the transition to a post-primary context. The value of technology in augmenting students' engagement was also valued by the parents/carers of children who required technology.

A student participating in the case studies acknowledged the impact of the support from their SET:

She helped me a lot... she helped me with, what is it called? Fractions, decimals, fractions, and all of that. My teacher didn't really know. When I asked for help, she just told me how to do it, but she didn't show me how to do it. I am more visual. I hate verbal. I am more visual. (Student, mainstream primary school)

SNAs were seen as having a positive impact on children's learning and their overall school experience. They were also acknowledged as supporting students':

- medical needs
- organisation and transition
- Mobility

- movement breaks
- social engagement with peers
- community engagement
- life skills
- access to the curriculum
- completion of school tasks independently.

One principal noted that the SNA is:

*... a huge aspect to a child's comfort level in school and their confidence.
(Principal, special school)*

Some participants noted the impact of SNAs on parental/carer engagement. SNAs are often the 'go to person for parents' (Principal), with one principal noting that SNAs:

... are vital, absolutely vital, to children and to families. (Principal, special school)

The impact of SNAs on parental/carer engagement was described in terms of the regular communication that they foster with parents/carers, which was seen as impacting positively on the overall quality of education experience. Bus escorts also featured in the data. As with SNAs, they were seen as providing a link between home and school. In addition to supporting the transition between home/parent/carer to school/school staff, they were seen as providing support for students' emotional, behavioural and medical needs daily:

Those participants who engaged with the VTS described its impact positively:

I found it very interesting and very helpful in how you might assist the student. [The support] has had a very positive impact on the students. (SNA, special school)

The VTS was noted by some participants as being particularly impactful during times of transition – from pre-school to primary and from primary to post-primary. The VT was perceived to support students, parents/carers and school staff. This may reflect the way in which the VTS works with service users, as VTS professionals have a direct relationship of support with students, parents and schools that is often long lasting. Many of these accounts of NCSE services and their impact highlight the value that participants placed on longer-term personalised relationships centred on the school's unique context.

As will be described in Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time', impact was often perceived as negative where the outcomes of exceptional reviews did not result in additional support.

Wellbeing and inclusion

With continuing reference to case-study data, there were many examples of NCSE frontline services, impacting on student wellbeing and inclusion. Parents/carers described their child's transition to a mainstream post-primary school and noted the impact that support had on their children:

She has grown in confidence, and I put that down to her having that support there ... finding her way around the school. At the start I thought it was going to be crazy, how is she going to manage? But she got incredible help and support. It worked especially at the start. In first year, it really helped her settle in, her confidence level and less anxiety. (Parent/carer, post-primary mainstream school)

Overall, my child's needs for the last decade have been more than well met here. (Parent/carer, special school).

Overall, the participatory encounters with CYP in the case studies captured how frontline services were supporting students' wellbeing and inclusion, either directly or indirectly. It was important to ensure that CYP were supported to participate fully and meaningfully in learning.

One of the students noted how school staff helped them:

They have helped me throughout some of the tougher times when I used to get upset and that a lot. They used to help me a lot through them by giving me tasks to distract me and that kind of stuff. (Student, special school)

This student who was preparing to complete their programme in a special school captured the impact of the environment on wellbeing. They reflected on the classroom in which they spent the most time:

I like the size of it. It's a nice big room. You can put loads of art up on the walls. It's a nice part of it. There is a library at the back of it. It's really nice. I spent most of my life in it. (Student, special school)

Another primary mainstream student described the support they got from their SET teacher who took them on walks around the yard each day. They described the sound of walking on the stones as relaxing.

The following vignette focuses how impact was perceived in the context of support for a 14-year-old student with SEN in a mainstream school.

Vignette Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders': CYP1, 14 years old**Introduction**

TCYP1 is 14 years old. They are a second-year student in a town, mainstream (non-DEIS), single-sex post-primary school. There are 96 children with SEN enrolled in the school. CYP1 is assessed with a mild general learning disability and dyslexia. They are engaging with a Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP). In school, CYP1 is supported by the special education coordinator, the L2LP coordinator, SNAs and mainstream subject teachers. The CYP has received support from outside agencies such as speech and language therapy.

Description of impact

The availability of the L2LP has facilitated CYP1 to access post-primary education in a mainstream setting. The programme was offered in the school, for the first-time, in response to CYP1's learning needs. CYP1 is positive about their experience and described how having less withdrawal, than experienced in primary school, has made them feel more included and built their confidence. CYP1 attends mainstream classes for all subjects, except Gaeilge, for which they have an exemption. Their favourite subjects are CSPE and SPHE as they describe the topics as 'interesting' and they like to 'chat about them' with their friends (Student, post-primary mainstream school, S8].

They are currently enjoying sowing a garden in SPHE as they like practical outdoor activities. This CYP also receives learning support in literacy. They are happy with their programme and find the overall workload manageable. Digital technology is used to support engagement with their learning programme, and they are supported to develop as a digital learner. Digital technology supports communication with CYP1's parents and through providing a platform for sharing resources, allows them to support the CYP with homework.

As captured in CYP1's map, the day starts at their locker where they get organised and meet friends. They have also drawn themselves learning in class with friends and taking a movement break with their SNA. These movement breaks support the CYP to manage anxiety. SNAs also help with organisation, navigation of the timetable and school and completion of schoolwork. Peers are very important to CYP1. They described having good relationships with classmates and noted one close friend with whom they eat lunch and interact during breaktimes. Their favourite part of the school day is going outside at lunchtime with friends. Opportunities to collaborate with peers during extracurricular activities, such as the school show, were also important to this CYP.

CYP1's parent is very satisfied with their child's educational experience and feels confident that the SENO and school will seek any resources required to support the CYP's education.



CYP1's map of favourite places in school and people they like to spend time with

Conclusion

This vignette illustrates the impact of school staff, the learning environment and peers on CYP1's overall feeling of wellbeing and inclusion. School staff feel that the NCSE has been pivotal in guiding the school's implementation of the continuum of support.

Descriptions of impact were shared by a few NCSE staff during the in-depth interviews. These focused on improved access to education, particularly in relation to access to special classes for children with ASD, although there were some concerns that an increase in special classes might not be sustainable. One participant described the impact of the VTS on children with hearing impairments:

The biggest thing that I would be proud of is the language development of the students, of the toddlers ... and especially a toddler that's after getting a cochlear implant. The language explosion is phenomenal. And if we can support the parents to support that language development, it's amazing. (VT for children who are deaf/hard of hearing – in-depth interview)

They gave an example that illustrated the impact of the VTS service on a parent's perceptions of their child's capabilities. This was important to the parent's wellbeing and optimism for the future:

Just recently I have one little girl. She's just a little bit over one. I've been working with her and mum for quite some time. She was wearing very high-powered hearing aids, and her language wasn't developing but everything else was. So, when we were doing the developmental checklist with mum, we were saying, look, you know, if the receptive language isn't there, the expressive language isn't, and her receptive language is quite low because of her hearing. She wasn't accessing sound, but I was able to show mum that, developmentally, she was actually excelling in all other areas. (VT for children who are deaf/hard of hearing – in-depth interview).

Though outweighed by process considerations, there were 44 references to positive impact coded in the interview data for school staff and NCSE staff.

School staff described typical impacts. Support for the blind from the VT was perceived by a member of school staff as having supported the school in knowing what books and IT equipment a family were entitled to, and how to apply for them. The impact was access to education. For another participant, NCSE advice had an impact on a child because structures and procedures were put in place that had brought benefits. However, the actual impacts were undefined. For some staff, impact from NCSE advisors had been reassurance. It had helped them feel like they were doing a good job and affirmed their professionalism. The following extract provides one illustration of this in relation to the NCSE advisory service and professional affirmation:

So [the support] was really positive for that teacher and almost re-energised them – it certainly gave him a phenomenal feeling that it's okay, you're doing a good job – and that sustained that teacher for a long time. (SET and deputy principal 2, primary mainstream school)

Generally, school staff and NCSE staff were more likely to perceive positive impact in terms of getting an additional resource than through, for instance, articulating the impact of that resource on the educational access, wellbeing or educational progress of a student with SEN. Nonetheless, in-depth interviews with school staff, most participants were able to affirm one or more positive impacts from the services they had accessed. Examples of the NCSE frontline services identified in descriptions of positive impact included:

- the VTS – perceived to bring benefits to practices, staff and parents/carers
- the SENO – support for accessing additional staffing (SNA and SET) and setting up a special class – positive impacts on inclusion and wellbeing for students, arising from additional staff and special classes
- TPL impacts on confidence, resulting in the affirmation of current practices
- the NCSE advisory service – direct or indirect impact on practices and staff confidence
- an indirect impact from research published by the NCSE on practice.

The subtheme 'Descriptions of impact' was also present in the data arising from the in-depth interviews with parents/carers. For all parents/carers (including those with an overall mixed or negative sentiment), positive impacts were described. In most cases, these impacts were seen to arise from the provision of additional staffing (specifically SNAs), appropriate placements and the SENOs role in helping the parents/carers to access these for their child. Positive impacts included improved access to education, educational progress, reassurance for the student and family and improved wellbeing. For example, one parent/carer of a child with ASD reported the following about SNA support provided, and how it supported their child's social and educational inclusion.

I know it's not all one to one, but he has more or less one-to-one SNA support which allows him to participate in all of the activities as well. So as do most of the other children as class which means they can all come together as a group and participate in activities too. (Parent/carer 7 – in-depth interview, special school placement, mixed to positive sentiment)

This quotation shows how important it was to the parent/carer that her children could participate in learning and social activities. Another parent/carer described her child's experience of enjoying school. This was because the additional support provided in a special class in a mainstream school and the support of an SNA had enabled the child access to a wide curriculum and a flexible model of placement:

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 ASD, in-depth interview, special class in mainstream school, mixed to positive sentiment).

In the quotation above, the parent/carer is emphasising that the small class size and individual attention in the special class have been highly beneficial for her child, who thrives in this setting, while also having opportunities to join mainstream activities for social experiences like outdoor play and events. In all cases where parents/carers were providing accounts of positive impact, it is because of additional support (SNA, special class) provided in the context of a caring, responsive school, and where their children have been able to participate in learning and social events as a result. Inclusive outcomes like these seem to really matter to parents.

Subtheme: 'Process schema dominant over impact schema'

This subtheme contains data where experiences of process (for example applications) dominated participant accounts of their experience of NCSE frontline services. The data for this subtheme is drawn from in-depth interviews with school staff and NCSE staff/associates. Generally, participants spent less time sharing their perceptions of impact than they did their experiences of process. This phenomenon was even more marked than it was in the case of in-depth interviews with parents/carers. It is interesting to note that this may offer some explanation for the relatively positive view of impact found in the survey of parents/carers and the relatively negative view of impact found in the survey of school staff.

Subtheme: 'Process schema dominant over impact schema': in-depth interviews with school staff and NCSE staff

In this section, the term 'schema' refers to cognitive frameworks and conceptual maps that are used to interpret and organise information. When talking with school staff and NCSE staff, it emerged that schemas of *process* seemed uppermost in participants' minds. These are schemas where the process of requesting/applying for support, the experience of that process, and the outcome of getting (or not getting) additional supports (such as an SNA from an exceptional review) are the ideas/experiences most active when they are asked about their views on impact. Although a few descriptions of impact on children and families were present in the interview data for school staff and NCSE staff, there were many more references to process and the *impact* of the process in terms of stress and workload in the interview data for school staff and NCSE staff (there were 540 references in the coded data for in-depth interviews with school staff and NCSE staff related to *process*, compared to 44 focused on descriptions of *impact*). This means that even when prompted, interviewees were more focused on relating their experience of process.

It is not clear why a process schema was dominant in the interviews with these participant groups, but several explanations are possible. For example, many school staff (in the interviews, case studies and survey) and some parents/carers (interviews) report negative experiences in the run-up to getting or *not* getting additional support (see Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment') and found these starting stages isolating, stressful or time-consuming. Many describe onerous and sometimes stressful workloads for making requests/applications (see Theme 3: subtheme 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment') or in their interactions with a service. These experiences may have strong emotional resonance, making them foremost in people's minds when they are talking with researchers about their interactions with the NCSE.

Another explanation is a latent assumption that once support is allocated because of interactions with the NCSE (for example a special class or SNA), positive impacts on children and families are a natural or inevitable consequence. As such, impact does not need further analysis because the gaining of an additional resource is the outcome sought, and inclusive outcomes like wellbeing (for families, staff and students), access to education and progress for pupils are consequences that can be taken for granted. In this way, impact is conceptualised as the getting or not getting an additional resource. Participants may be taking the position that if a requested additional

resource (like an SNA or a special class) was not needed to impact inclusion, wellbeing and progress, or was not crucial to these outcomes, then it would not have been requested in the first place. Another explanation is that impacts such as inclusion, wellbeing and progress, are outcomes that schools are most responsible for delivering in comparison to NCSE services and staff, where the aim is to allocate the resource or support school staff in facilitating inclusion. It follows that impacts on students and families beyond those which arise from process (for example stress, heavy workload, feeling supported) are not schematically credited to the NCSE's services or to the organisation.

Finally, for NCSE staff, whose roles are more distant from the day-to-day milieu of school, and whose activities are designed to support parents/carers to access additional supports (for example SENOs) or to help schools use them more effectively (for example NCSE advisors), it is possible that knowing or observing impacts is a little more challenging. In the interviews with NCSE staff, the exception to this was the VT who was able to describe impacts on language development, probably because of the prolonged contact with children and families in this role.

Process schema as dominant over impact schema is a phenomenon of interest because it may indicate the dominance of a process culture. It may be that an impact culture would work better to catalyse inclusive practice, as it would position the NCSE's role in a continuum of support that runs from its services to schools, students and families, and then back again. This idea is further explored in Section 8 (Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'). This phenomenon is also highlighted as it may explain why the findings of the parents/carers survey show more positive perceptions of the benefit of the NCSE's frontline services when compared to the findings of the survey of school staff. There seems to be a difference in the way that parents/carers and school staff perceive or experience impact, with parents/carers being more likely to describe impacts on their child and school staff being more likely (generally) to describe impact in terms of receiving or not receiving a requested support.

Summary

This section has reported the findings in Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived by stakeholders'. This theme contained data on 'Descriptions of impact' and 'Process schema dominance over impact schema'. The data included participants' descriptions of impact, such as effects on staff confidence, children's wellbeing and inclusion. A phenomenon of interest was that participants tended to elaborate more on their experiences of the process (for example applications) than on the impact of the service on staff, families or students. The findings in this theme addressed the following RQ:

- RQ2: 'What was the impact of NSCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'

Overall, the data illustrates varying perceptions among parents/carers regarding the impacts and benefits of different NCSE frontline services, and services in general. However, a majority acknowledged positive impacts on educational access, social benefits and wellbeing for their children, and a majority perceived support from SENOs to be beneficial (52 per cent). Support from the VTS was deemed beneficial by most parents/carers whose children had accessed this frontline service (81 per cent). The data also highlights the role of these services in enhancing parental/carer knowledge and understanding. In the free-text survey entries, some parents/carers provide accounts of negative impacts and experiences, and these are considered later in the report (when discussing communication and relationships). During in-depth interviews, a majority of parents/carers reported at least one negative impact or experience of interacting with NCSE frontline services, even when overall, they held a positive sentiment towards the organisation. The findings in Themes 2, 3 and 4 provide some explanation for this.

While school staff generally reported fewer positive perceptions of the impacts of frontline services, key findings reveal nuanced impacts. The survey highlighted varying views, with some school staff acknowledging improved knowledge about specific needs (40 per cent), increased confidence (34 per cent), enhanced methods and processes (36 per cent) and improved inclusive practices (32 per cent). Notably, over 70 per cent of school staff perceived no, little or detrimental impact on other children and on parents/carers. These differences are of interest as they seem to indicate that parent/carers and school staff have a different view of impact and the reasons for this are unclear, though again, findings in Themes 2, 3, 4 provide potential explanations related to relationships, communication and public relations.

In contrast, case studies included accounts of positive perceptions among a majority of school staff. This may be because data was collected in situ, and so participants were thinking more holistically about the links between their interaction with a service and impacts on the school community and students themselves. Where interactions with NCCE's frontline services (for example with a SENO member of the advisory service) had resulted in additional staffing or other resources, this was perceived to improve learning, inclusion and wellbeing for students. Positive impacts on confidence and practice were described in relation to TPL, NCSE guides and advisory services, especially when aligned with a school's specific needs or age phase. The NCSE in-school advisory service was credited with affirming good practices and helping with effective staff deployment strategies within a school. Additionally, the use of the NCSE website and research publications indirectly influenced school practices. Overall, the securing of additional supports emerged as a prominent positive impact cited by participants, as was the case for the in-depth interviews, and negative impacts were described when these were not provided. This lends further support to the suggestion that getting an applied-for resource is considered an impact in itself and a primary one at that.

Data in this theme has also demonstrated that when school staff and NCSE staff are asked about impact during in-depth interviews, they focus mainly on processes. In this context, process schema are dominant over impact schema, and this is noted as a phenomenon of interest. It is not clear why this is the case, and some possible explanations have been suggested (for example, the emotional resonance of difficult or stressful interactions with the NCSE over application processes), but it might indicate a need for frontline services and school communities to consider, together, how desired impacts are constructed as a consequence of their interaction, how they can be observed and how they can be strengthened. Data in Themes 2, 3 and 4 provide other explanations for the dominance of process schema, as they contain accounts of fractured communication and time-consuming bureaucracy.

More generally, the data indicates that there is scope to increase user satisfaction with the full range of NCSE frontline services, given that a majority of school staff report no, few or detrimental benefits, and that where a majority of participants identify most frontline services as impactful, the majority is relatively small. The focus on impact as the receipt or denial of a requested resource is of interest. However, positive perceptions of the VTs indicate that high levels of expertise combined with a continuous relationship with families and schools are important catalysts for positive perceptions of service quality and impact. Data in Theme 2 supports the claim that communication and relationships are central to improving service user's perceptions across the piece and their experience of the agency.

6. Findings – Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment'

This section reports the findings for Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment' and contains data illustrating how participants' experiences of interacting with the NCSE's frontline services and the people who deliver them are relevant to their perception of the quality and impact of these services.

There are three subthemes in Theme 1: 'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff', 'Sustained personalised relationships and their value', and experiences along a 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating'. Findings in this theme are relevant to the following RQs for this study.

- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Across the data, we observe that parents/carers and school staff communicate positive sentiments about the NCSE when they experience prolonged contact with a service or an individual from that service who is competent. Where their interactions with these services/individuals are responsive and personalised, they also speak more positively. In this context, the quality of communication and relationships was observed to mediate service users' sentiments towards the NCSE in general, and its individual services.

In this section, the following data is used:

Descriptive data from the online surveys of parents/carers and school staff are referred to and findings reported. Where direct quotations are used, characteristics of the participant are also cited to indicate whether the text was provided by a parent/carer, a school leader (principal/deputy principal) or teacher (class teacher, SET teacher, SNA). Where free text from surveys is referred to, readers can be assured that these responses represent the views of different respondents. Quantitative data is presented using tables and graphs.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with school staff, NCSE staff/associates and parents/carers is also included. This is narratively reported with use of excerpts where relevant. Data from case studies is used to illuminate the findings. This includes the use of vignettes of individual students with SEN, which offer contextualised illustrations of the phenomenon as it was experienced within schools.

It is important to note that the data content for this theme is drawn mainly from in-depth interviews and case studies because these sources contain the richest accounts of how effective communication and positive relationships were prioritised by participants. Data from these sources is highlighted because it suggests that these phenomena were mediators of sentiment.

Subtheme: 'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff'

This subtheme contains data related to participants' views on the role of the SENO and its essentiality. It also contains some accounts of the important role that school staff play in supporting parents/carers and their children.

Subtheme: 'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff in the qualitative data'

During in-depth interviews, parents/carers gave examples of how the SENO was crucial for determining inclusive outcomes for their child, either as a gateway to additional resources, support and advice for most, or for some, as a barrier to these resources. The majority of parents/carers reported positive experiences of support from SENOs. In these cases, the SENO had been crucial as a source of information and support and in a few cases, SENO had also acted as an advocate. For example, a typical experience is a parent/carers' account of feeling supported after she was in touch with a team manager (in the absence of a SENO in her area), and the way in which this SENO had helped her to navigate placement options successfully:

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 ASD attending special school, mixed sentiment)

The quotation above shows how important the regional manager had been to the parent/carer in securing an appropriate educational placement for their child. This participant also spoke about the critical role of the team manager in securing a timely placement for her child in a special school. Despite the initial plan to enrol the child the following September, the regional manager proactively facilitated an earlier placement when a spot became available mid-year, demonstrating continued attention and care. This action was particularly fortunate in the parent/carers' view as it prevented a lengthy wait of three years for the next available place. The parent's gratitude underscores the SENO's significant impact on the child's educational journey.

For the parents/carers who held a mixed to positive sentiment towards NCSE frontline services, their experiences of support improved once they had found a way to accessing an individual within the service who was responsive, knowledgeable and able (and willing) to support. For example, one parent/carer explained how a change to a more proactive SENO had helped them feel that they were in competent hands:

Having said that though [participant referring to a point she made about interactions with a SENO that were not very positive], when my child got his place in their special class, we had a different SENO who was really positive, really proactive. She was really engaged with the school. (Parent/carer 7, in-depth interview, child with ASD attending special school, mixed to positive sentiment)

This parent/carer went on to emphasise the practical and supportive actions of a SENO in facilitating a smooth transition for her child. When the opening of a new class was delayed, the SENO promptly approved additional weeks of HT, which also allowed her child to continue attending his old pre-school. The subsequent placement into the special school was handled efficiently, with the SENO ensuring a quick and seamless process. This is another illustration of the SENO's crucial role in providing timely and practical support to meet a family's needs.

Most parent/carers talked about how they might have missed an opportunity for getting the right placement for their child without the SENO's expert knowledge of the options for special classes available in the area. For example, a parent/carer recounted the guidance provided by a SENO who offered specific, well-informed advice on applying for autism classes, detailing the necessary assessment reports and application requirements. Additionally, the SENO possessed critical information about the availability of places in various schools, information not readily accessible to the public. This assistance proved essential, as the parent/carer would have been unaware of these opportunities without the SENO's expertise:

[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 ASD attending special class, positive sentiment).

However, some participants explained that they either did not have a SENO available in their area or that the quality of support varied. How supported they were, depended on the individual SENO they were interacting with at the time. The following is an example of a parent/carer explaining her experience of a service that seemed variable in quality and responsiveness:

You cannot get your SENO on the phone, and they go on holidays at the most crucial time of the year for people and like, I actually don't have a SENO at the moment. There's nobody in the position for our area. And whereas my previous one was fantastic, she went on maternity leave, and the one before that was a nightmare, and the one before that was a nightmare. (Parent/carer 9, in-depth interview, child with ASD attending special school, negative sentiment).

This parent/carer expressed frustration with the SENO role, noting a discrepancy between expectations (as outlined on the NCSE website) and what was delivered. This participant's experience of the SENO role was that it was mainly bureaucratic and concerned with 'signing forms'. When seeking a school place for her child, she found that the SENO was unable or unwilling to provide specific information, often directing her to check the website instead. This lack of personalised support did not align with what she had understood about the remit of the SENO role.

The majority of parents/carers described the importance of school staff in providing support for their child and family. For example, SNAs were described as 'compassionate', 'good at their job' and a first port of call for information and reassurance for both parents/carers and children.

During in-depth interviews, some school staff described the way in which they were helping parents/carers to access information and viewed themselves as the 'first port of call' (School principal, mainstream). One principal explained how she tried to explain the value of the universal supports provided in schools and how these replaced the need for additional support:

I suppose [when I'm communicating with parents/carers, I am] also trying to make parents aware of how capable their child is at times. Sometimes parents are inclined to look for the supports, where actually, if the child's progress is being monitored and reviewed on a regular basis, and if there's testing happening, checking in on how the student is progressing, and if the supports are adequate, the diagnosis and supports aren't needed. (School principal 4, in-depth interview, primary mainstream, mixed sentiment)

This principal wanted to emphasise the importance of helping parents to recognise their child's capabilities, noting that parents may often seek additional supports almost as a default when they are anxious about an aspect of their child's education. However, the principal suggested that ongoing educational assessment can cast light on whether existing supports (whether these are universal or additional) are sufficient, potentially negating the need for further diagnosis and additional resources. This approach aims to reassure parents about their child's progress and the adequacy of current provisions. In this way, the principal is aware of the role of schools in providing high-quality learning for all, and potentially, of the importance of universal design. Generally, this way of thinking about universal supports (such as high-quality teaching and assessment as a route to understanding and meeting needs) was rare in the corpus data. The reason for this rarity is not clear, but it may indicate how, schematically, school staff connect the NCSE with the notion of additional, targeted support.

All school staff who talked about their experience of the SENO saw the role as crucial in a similar way to parents/carers. Positive impacts from interactions with SENOs were described in terms of the guidance on applying for additional support, including how to strengthen an application and how to set up special classes if they were approved. One principal explained:

[SENOs] know what you're going to get it or not. I wouldn't waste my time, doing the paperwork. I trust him to give me the right advice. (School principal 6, in-depth interview, post-primary mainstream with special classes, positive sentiment)

The quotation demonstrates the value that school staff place on having a SENO whom they trust. As discussed previously (with reference to the subtheme 'Process schema dominant over impact schema'), when school staff were reflecting on the SENO role, the focus was on the impact on making applications for additional support, rather than the impact on the school community (in terms of inclusion, participation, belonging, staff confidence). As noted earlier in this report, this suggests that school staff consider the receipt of additional resources as the impact because once these are in place, it is assumed that other benefits will follow.

School staff explained that negative impacts (such as high workload, frustration and feeling isolated) arose when the SENO in their region was not very experienced or effective. However, when the SENO was capable, they described positive impacts such as protection from unnecessary workload. Some participants explained how the SENO helped them to prioritise applications that were more likely to succeed, and how to write an application to improve its chances of success. Again, this is a process phenomenon, with the impacts being about the process rather than inclusive outcomes for students.

Variation in the quality of competence of the SENO workforce had been experienced by the majority of participants, and they were grateful when their SENO was a competent and responsive one and disappointed when an effective SENO left. The majority of school staff who talked about the SENO role had positive things to say about the impact of the role on gaining the additional resources they needed and the related danger of not having an effective SENO assigned to the school. One principal spoke warmly of the effectiveness of SENOs:

SENOs provide advice when necessary – so I think the role of the SENO within the NCSE is huge, and I think it is carried out extremely effectively in our case here anyway, in this school. (School Principal 6, in-depth interview, post-primary mainstream with special classes, positive sentiment)

From this comment, we can interpret that this principal considered the role of the SENO within the NCSE is considered highly significant and impactful. The SENO's provision of advice, when needed, is seen as a crucial aspect of their role. In the specific context of the respondent's school, the SENO's duties are perceived to be executed extremely effectively, suggesting a positive experience with the support and guidance offered by the SENO. It is important to observe that in all cases where school staff were describing negative experiences of the SENO service, it was also the case that they exhibited a negative or mixed sentiment on the NCSE and its frontline services. This also leads us to observe that the SENO role influences sentiment towards the NCSE more generally. Data from in-depth interviews demonstrated that school staff prized a *positive relationship* with a *competent* SENO. For most participants, the SENO was seen as the face of the NCSE. Schools' predominant engagement with the NCSE is perceived as being through the SENO, who many relied on to answer questions around NCSE processes and applications for resources, for example. This was also observed in data sourced from the *case studies*.

Perceptions of the quality of support provided by the SENO varied across the schools participating in the case studies. In some cases, schools had a good relationship with their SENO, who was perceived to be working hard to understand the school and its community. Some case-study schools did not then have access to a SENO or at the time of data collection had never had a school visit from their SENO. Some participants felt that communication between the SENO and parents/carers could be improved. One principal observed that there was:

*... no link between the NCSE and the parents... the SENO and the parents is never positive.
(Principal, special school)*

Though the survey findings indicate that the majority of parents/carers perceive SENO support positively, there was a perception among school staff that schools were mediating the relationship between the NCSE and parents/carers, and that support was 'never led by the NCSE' (Principal). While some parents/carers reported never having had contact with the SENO, another reflected on a positive engagement with the SENO when their child was transitioning to primary school. In this instance the SENO supported the family accessing and sourcing the required supports to help their child. This engagement was described by the parent/carer as:

... a fabulous exercise from my point of view and the NCSE point of view to highlight the supports. (Parent/carer, special school)

In the in-depth interviews, most NCSE staff or associates described the SENO role as crucial. Where SENOs were knowledgeable, competent and responsive, parents/carers felt more confidence in the system and in the NCSE. This observation is borne out by the corpus data. Some participants observed that SENOs work had become very focused on, for example, setting up special classes and supporting applications for reviews or additional resources. These same participants explained that some shifts in focus were needed to facilitate more cross-service and cross-sectoral working, along with more focus on supporting schools in using more effectively the resources they already had.

Subtheme: 'Sustained, personalised relationships and their value'

This subtheme contains data representing the importance of sustained, personalised relationships to positive perceptions of service quality. It begins with data sourced from the in-depth interviews with NCSE staff.

When talking about the quality of support from NCSE frontline services during in-depth interviews, some NCSE staff reflected on the importance of good relationships between SENOs and the communities they work with. For example:

*The Minister's office contacted me to speak to a parent who ... was very upset, very annoyed, was at their wits end in relation to their child and their performance and their education in school and in terms of the SENO who ended up contacting that person and actually resolved matters. And the parent actually rang me back to basically say that they were quite happy.
(Member of NCSE executive staff, in-depth interview)*

Here, a member of the NCSE's executive team recounts a parent/carer's experience of two different SENOs. Initially, parents perceived the first SENO as defensive and rigid, strictly adhering to procedures in a depersonalised way. In contrast, when a new SENO took over the case, the parent felt an immediate rapport, appreciating the empathy and understanding shown. This SENO prioritised the child's needs over strict policy adherence, leading to a more positive and supportive experience for the parents. This suggests that personal approach and empathy can significantly impact parents' satisfaction with the support they receive. It also illustrates how NCSE staff recognised that the 'softer' person-centred skills of empathy, mutual respect and active listening were important in determining how positively service users would feel about the organisation and the decisions it made. This phenomenon is also borne out by the corpus data.

During in-depth interviews, most school staff described the importance of good relationships. The services described most positively were those that were delivered over a longer period and involved sustained interaction between the individuals providing the service and school staff. For example, the majority of participants who had experienced the NCSE advisory service described the quality and relevance of the support they had received positively, particularly when the approach was personalised and sensitive:

The in-school support we had was helpful and supportive to me and the class teacher. The advisor helped us to use sensory breaks, and we realised that [the child] needed these breaks quite often. The advisor said to us 'I know I am asking a lot' and that way of talking to us was absolutely brilliant. We will use this service again if we need it. (Deputy principal 2/SET, primary mainstream Irish medium with special classes, in-depth interview, positive sentiment)

The above quotation highlights the importance of empathy. School staff valued this kind of sensitivity. Feeling listened to and understood was important to school staff and coloured their sentiments. For example, a school principal talked about an NCSE advisor who had been more effective than another, and at the heart of this was a difference in attitude.

[This advisor] was a bit more positive. She was understanding. She listened to what we were saying and helped us find a way forward that worked better for us (School Principal 4, primary mainstream, mixed sentiment).

As shown in the quotation above, sentiments about the quality and relevance of the service were positive when advice was appreciative and contextualised. Two school staff had also worked with the VTS. Both described their experience positively, noting the importance of personalised, sensitive interactions. Most school staff who were interviewed expressed a preference for face-to-face, sustained contact with services, such as the NCSE advisory service and the VTS, as these seemed to help more than a one-off visit, an online conversation or a two-hour online TPL event.

Though the crucial role of the SENO has already been discussed under the first subtheme of this section, it seems important to reiterate that the quality of relationship between a SENO and the school community was pivotal. Where SENOs really got to know a school and took their time to build a relationship, this was highly valued.

So, when it's a SENO being 'I've been to your school, I completely get and know you, your pupils and what you're asking me for and I am going to do everything I can to support you, this is how we are going to do it now' ... it is more effective, and this is my experience personally. (School principal 5, primary mainstream, mixed sentiment)

In this quotation, the importance of knowing the school context is again amplified. Some participants explained their view that the decline in face-to-face contact (which they perceived to be due to COVID-19 and NCSE staff shortages) was in part, an explanation for reduced levels of satisfaction and confidence in the NCSE. Participants were keen to encourage the NCSE to invest in making face-to-face contact and prolonged relationships a priority for the future.

In the school case studies, many participants also expressed a preference for face-to-face, sustained contact with NCSE frontline services. Some acknowledged the lack of visibility of the NCSE in schools and considered this an important issue to address. For example, an SNA commented:

I don't see a presence of the NCSE within the school community. They don't seem to be a visible presence in the school. (SNA, special school)

The question for the NCSE is about how it can make its services more visible in schools, in the context of an actualised increase in staffing following Budget 23 and increases in funding. Overall, it seems that negative experience of the various processes discussed in Theme 1 contributed to feelings of anxiety and frustration. The extent to which experience of processes mediate participants' perceptions are explored further in the context of Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time'.

The vignette below narrates the experience of an 18-year-old student who attends a special school and provides a contextualised account of the importance of sustained personalised relationships in the lived experience of young person (CYP) with SEN in school:

Vignette Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of positive sentiment towards NCSE frontline services': CYP6, 18 years old

Introduction

CYP6 is 18 years old and attends a special school located in a town and serving over 80 primary and post-primary students assessed with moderate, severe and profound general learning disabilities. CYP6 is assessed with an intellectual disability, adaptive functioning difficulties and epilepsy. The Level 1 Learning Programme (L1LP) is used as the curriculum option for academic achievement. They have attended this school since they were 5 years old and are preparing to transition to a new setting. They are supported by an SNA, SET, class teacher and a nurse. They travel to school by bus.

Sustained personalised relationships and their value

As CYP6 is a long-term member of the school community, they have built close relationships with staff whom they join for coffee each morning before class. These conversations are important to CYP6 as they provide an opportunity to plan and to have fun together. They spoke about having good days and bad days and noted how conversations with staff helped them to manage challenges 'Talking to people I trust, feel comfortable with and then tell me that I must speak my mind because if I hold it all in it won't fix, you know it just keeps piling up on me on the inside'. (Student, special school post-primary, S9)

CYP6 has been given increased responsibility during their time in school. They are now responsible for feeding the school fish each day. They also have more input into target-setting for their own curriculum programme. Additional time is given to home economics, as CYP6 wants to become more self-sufficient. They like making hot chocolate (with real chocolate rather than powder) and brownies. A local artist provides 1:1 tuition for CYP6 as this is a particular interest. They are proud of photographs and samples of their art displayed throughout the school.

CYP6 recalled having more friends in school when they were younger. Now some friends have moved on (CYP6 did not leave the school with their class group last year as they did not feel ready) and sadly some are deceased. Some staff have retired during their time in school. They enjoy weekly trips to local shops, post office or café and like meeting people on these excursions. CYP6's parents are involved in target-setting and reviews and the school use a home-school journal and a closed social media account to collaborate with them.



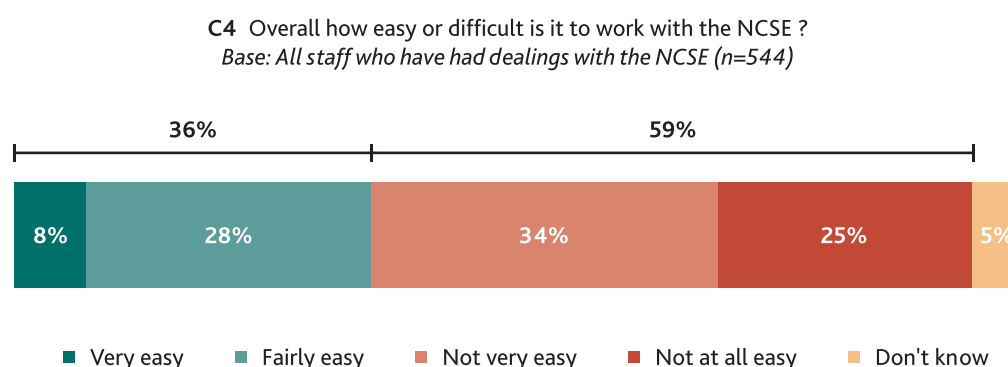
Figure 2. CYP6's map that includes their daily journey to school, learning activities in school and community and their future journey to their new setting and life at home on the farm with the animals

Conclusion

CYP6 placed a considerable value on the personalised and sustained relationships that had been cultivated and nurtured during their education journey, it is evident from the data that these relationships have been significant as mediators of positive sentiment for CYP6 in relation to their schooling experience. Though this cannot be interpreted as a direct reflection of the CYP6s views on NCSE frontline services, this account shows the importance of relationships in the day-to-day context of school.

Subtheme: 'Sustained, personalised relationships and their value': online survey of school staff

Linking to the issue of relationships, in the online survey of school staff, a minority of school staff had found the NCSE very collaborative, with 36 per cent reporting that they were easy to work with and 8 per cent saying they were very easy. A majority (59 per cent) thought they were either not very easy or not at all easy to work with (Figure 6.1). These are indications of the operational challenge that service users seem to encounter when communicating with the NCSE (further explored in the reporting of qualitative findings later).

Figure 6.1: Experience of working with the NCSE

Positive responses about working relationships often referred to individual members of staff. Some respondents felt they had a good relationship with their SENO and praised the individual, often while still expressing reservations around the NCSE.

We have a very good relationship with our local SENO. However, interactions with the NCSE; making applications for resources (such as additional SNA allocation) is too onerous and form heavy. I wonder if this is deliberately done to reduce the number of applications made. I also question the depth of expertise that exists within the NCSE in relation to the various types of SEN that exist among the student population. (Leader)

Related to this was an awareness of resourcing issues that make it difficult for SENOs to offer the support that is required. There was also a feeling that good staff can be hard to come by, although there are some highly effective and knowledgeable workers offering support:

I think there are individuals who work in schools for the NCSE (SLTs, OTs/NEPS, psychologists and SENO) and in the main they are very beneficial and the only access that the school has to any kind of support at the moment...however the organisation seems to have people with little or no experience of special education especially in the area of behaviours of concern. (Leader)

There was a feeling from staff completing the survey that relationships with the NCSE have become less effective over time, and this was partly due to in-person visits being less frequent:

We have had two SENO visits in the past six years – only because the school requested SNA exceptional reviews. The SENOs have never met with our pupils with complex needs. (Leader)

A few staff reported not having visits from SENOs for years and felt that this lack of contextual knowledge made it impossible for accurate assessments to be made. As a result, they did not feel that decisions and recommendations could be fit for purpose as they were too generalised:

Recommendations do not consider school resources or conditions and or staffing. Very poor understanding of how busy the role of principal is in managing the organisation. Need to provide staff training and resources especially the absolutely horrendous process of getting assistive technology for needy students – completely unacceptable. (Leader)

NCSE support staff need to come into classrooms and see the pupils in the classroom environment. It's frankly ridiculous that on a school visit suggestion are given on how to manage or support pupils without having seen the pupil interact with peers and in their learning environment. (Leader)

Related to this perceived breakdown in effective partnership working was the recurring theme that communication has been lacking from NCSE. School staff perceived that communications from the NCSE were often inadequate, particularly in relation to applications for exceptional reviews that were declined:

There is a total lack of communication between schools and the NCSE regarding the allocation of SET hours. I have appealed our hours twice and, on both occasions, I received a generic letter back that made no reference to my appeal. We are failing children [who] need specific interventions as we do not have the hours/staff to support them. (Leader)

As well as these general communications being criticised, school staff felt that there was a battle to get resources, and that communications and interactions were combative rather than collaborative, demonstrating a lack of mutual trust and respect:

Having to 'fight' for SNA hours even when gave lots of paperwork and diagnosis. High turnover of staff so [don't know who to contact]. Requesting SENO to visit numerous times over several years but no visit happening. Made to feel like I am trying to access support and services when we really don't need them. (Leader)

In the survey, parents/carers also emphasised the importance of relationships. They called for more personalised provision and assessment, with more time spent on one-to-one individual meetings. They criticised what they saw as a general, 'one size fits all' approach that did not work for them and led to the negative outcomes mentioned above:

The failure of the SENO to meet and have a face-to-face encounter/appraisal of a child means they are relying on algorithms/recommendations to decide the supports a child may need... undoubtedly this approach means many children don't get the supports they need, and a child may be at the mercy of teachers/SENCOs/parents, etc. In other words, the system often fails the child. (Parent/carer)

In summary, relationships were important to parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff, and this was demonstrated across the data. Participants' experiences of communication were also important in the stories they relayed about their engagement with NCSE frontline services, and this is explored in what follows.

Subtheme: 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating'

This section focuses more on data related to participants' experiences of communication with the NCSE and its frontline services. In this subsection, the word 'responsive' refers to timely responses to emails and phone calls, as well as timely processes. We note that where participants experience responsive communication, their perceptions are positive because they felt connected with the service that they needed and hence supported. The term 'isolating' refers to the consequences of unresponsiveness, where service users feel lost or abandoned while feeling in a state of high need or anxiety. Reporting of findings begins with a focus on data from the online survey of parents/carers and school staff.

Subtheme: 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating': online survey of parents/carers

The issue of communication arose frequently in the free-text comments written by parents/carers and school staff in the online survey. Parents/carers communicated feelings of isolation in the absence of support:

There was no support when our child suffered school trauma and absent due to emotionally based school avoidance. The idea seems to be 'not in school not able to help'. (Parent/carer)

Many parents/carers felt that they were not adequately supported by the NCSE and so took on the responsibility for finding resources and support themselves. In many cases, parents/carers reported being provided with a list of schools and having to contact the schools themselves and find what was available. Struggling alone was an experience they wanted to relate in their contributions to the survey:

When [my child] was newly diagnosed, there were very few special classes in my area. The SENO told me to canvas the local schools myself to open a class. On top of the stress of a child with severe ASD and other children with needs, it seemed to me that she wanted me to do her job for her as well. (Parent/carer)

All they [SENOs] do is sign forms, no support, and no help. They leave the parents do all the work for them and they are never available when you need them ... it is a case of constantly chasing them, which is time consuming and stressful. (Parent/carer)

For some, this feeling of struggle and being in the dark meant that they had to resort to home schooling, which was not what they felt was best for their child. Some parents/carers reported that the administrative burden of having to find placements and advocate for support was time consuming and stressful, as was the awareness that they were not experts on which resources were available or the best way to provide support for their child. Some parents/carers reported that this stress was exacerbated where applications for support were rejected:

The only 'support' I received was a diagnosis which the SENO gave my child and then refused his SNA application based on her diagnosis ... if children in need are relying on SENO support, they're going to be failed abysmally. (Parent/carer)

Some parents/carers reported negative experiences of the style of communication:

[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)

While there was an understanding that there were resourcing issues, some parents/carers felt that there was a lack of empathy on the part of some staff members, in some cases reporting unpleasant and upsetting interactions including the use of incorrect or insensitive language.

Some parents/carers felt that there was a lack of specialist knowledge among some NCSE staff members, as well as a lack of understanding of medical and educational needs. Parent/carers wanted a more collaborative approach involving the interaction of school/SENO and family:

[It's] very difficult to contact the SENO. She discusses my child with the school without parent[al] knowledge or consent. There's very little support for parents when there are issues with the school not having trained and knowledgeable staff. (Parent/carer)

Multiple parents/carers reported that it was difficult to have any contact with their SENO.

Well, for starters, to try and get actual contact with a SENO is almost always impossible. Secondly, when speaking to any SENO I've had to deal with, the attitude and feeling like you're almost a burden on them is palpable. (Parent/carer)

It was common for parents/carers to report that they did not receive any answers to queries or any updates on the process of applications or any upcoming allocations:

We had bare minimum contact, very unhelpful information, no assistance accessing supports in mainstream school and no help in finding a suitable school placement in special school. Stopped taking calls and never returned emails. Appalling service. (Parent/carer)

In relation to communication, there was a feeling that the processes around allocation and assessment were not as transparent as they should be and that more could be done in this regard to reassure parents/carers that they are not missing out and are being treated fairly:

I feel that giving the principal power over how they allocate resource and SNA access is not at all fair. I've contacted our SENO on multiple occasions regarding SNA allocation and resource allocation and each time she's refused to get involved. (Parent/carer)

Part of the reason for this perceived lack of transparency was parents feeling that they were not adequately consulted or a part of the review process and were being excluded from conversations with the school, making them feel ignored.

They seem to deal with school more than parents, which is definitely a barrier. (Parent/carer)

[The] SENO appeared very chummy with school and when we asked for needs to be met, got the refrain 'it's a school management issue' and 'there's nothing more we can do'. (Parent/carer)

A few parents/carers commented that this feeling was compounded by not receiving answers to queries. They felt like they had no say in decisions and were they then unable to challenge these decisions. In many cases, parents/carers who were unsuccessful were never told why their application was turned down:

There's been a lack of transparency in sharing information and unwillingness to respond to simple queries. (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers wanted better lines of communication with SENOs. They felt that there should be clearer information given as to their roles and to help inform parents/carers about what the processes are and what they may be entitled to:

You should share a support guide/pack with the parents and school when the child is starting to help ensure all basis are covered ...is there or will there be a SNA/resource teacher. (Parent/carer)

There needs to be an advertising campaign to highlight your service to parents. Accessing vital needs as an SNA is a fight and when parents are fighting daily for services to support their child this shouldn't be another one. (Parent/carer)

Many parents/carers would also like to have better ongoing lines of communication to have their queries answered and for there to be more regular and detailed updates:

We just want proactive contact with parents to provide information, empathetic communicative SENOs with up-to-date training and correct information at hand to provide to parents. Responding in timely professional manner to email requests for information. (Parent/carer)

They also commented that it would be beneficial for communication to be more precise and relevant. Many children have quite specific and complex needs and that guidance is too vague to be meaningfully helpful:

Information needs to be very specific – the general guides produced are too vague and no real use to parents or teachers. (Parent/carer)

Subtheme: 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating in the qualitative data'

During in-depth interviews with school staff, a majority reported similarly negative experiences of communication with the NCSE, even when their sentiments about frontline services were positive. Two principals explained a feeling of struggling alone. One principal explained that the school was without a SENO for over a year, that it was difficult since SENOs were a gateway to frontline services, and it was unclear what other lines of communication were available. Another explained that communication was somewhat slow and fractured at the point of requesting a visit from the NCSE advisory service. Another said that the SENO service had a negative impact because of poor communication. However, where communication was responsive and personalised, it was implicated in positive impact and positive sentiments.

Wider data content provides some explanation for the experiences related by the principals above and is further reported under the subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support: in-depth interviews with school staff and NCSE staff'.

Summary

This section has reported the findings in Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment'. The theme contained three subthemes: 'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff', 'Sustained personalised relationships and their value' and experiences along a 'Communication continuum from responsive to isolating'.

Findings in this theme are relevant to the following RQs for this study:

- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Across the corpus data, communication and relationships emerged as key areas for improvement within the NCSE's frontline services. Where there were timely responses to enquiries, a willingness to listen, personalised interactions, and more sustained contact, perceptions of the NCSE's impact were more positive, and sentiment towards the NCSE improved.

In the survey of parents/carers, many respondents reported feelings of isolation and being left in the dark due to poor communication and relationships. For example, parents/carers felt they had to navigate the system on their own, as their claims about their child's needs were often dismissed or their contacts with the NCSE went unanswered. The free-text comments also highlighted the critical role of the SENO as well as the importance of sensitive, supportive communication between SENOs and families. Some parents/carers reported feeling out of the loop, without a voice in decision-making about placements. They were unsure whether to submit applications and were unclear about why applications for additional support had been denied. Parents/carers expressed a desire for better communication with the NCSE, more transparency and improved collaboration between themselves, school staff and SENOs.

School staff also reported negative experiences in this area, even when their overall sentiment towards the NCSE was positive. In the case studies and in-depth interviews, there were accounts of slow responses to enquiries, decreasing face-to-face contact, and reliance on the competence of individual NCSE staff members (SENOs, VTs, advisory staff). Those who worked with a competent and responsive frontline team member had positive experiences. However, those who had no contact or interaction with a less competent individual, were less likely to report support and positive outcomes.

It is clear that an important area for improvement in NCSE frontline services is ensuring that all staff are knowledgeable, competent and skilled in building personalised and mutually supportive relationships. Many NCSE staff are already recognised for their competence. Increasing their presence and visibility in schools also emerges as a promising way to address this issue. The expansion of staffing as part of *Vision 26*, now a reality (see Section 2), may be linked to this, as increased staffing has the potential to enhance the NCSE's capacity for trust-building, more responsive communication and increased face-to-face interaction.

7. Findings – Theme 3: 'The right support at the right time and in the right place'

This section reports findings under the theme 'The right support in the right place at the right time'. Data in Theme 3 demonstrates that participants prized the additional support for schools, pupils and families delivered by the NCSE's frontline services. Data in the subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support' contains varied views on the resources available in the system and the potentialities and restrictions thereof. The subtheme 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment' is a phenomenon of interest and contains participants' descriptions of the ease or difficulty they encountered when making applications for support and the effect of this on their view of the quality of services and their impact.

In Section 5, the focus was impact. In this section, the concept of 'value' is centralised. It is important to clarify the difference between 'impact' and 'value' in the coding of the data. Where the word 'impact' is used, it is because participants are reporting their perceptions of how the supports provided by NCSE frontline services impacted on staff, students and families. Where the word 'value' is used, it is because participants are explaining the general value of the service(s) and the extent to which they prize or need that service and/or the additional supports delivered by those services (for example extra staff, advice, equipment, access to HT) that come from it.

Quantitative data from the survey of parents/carers and school staff. Descriptive statistics from the survey are presented in tables and graphs, to provide a clear and concise overview of the results and are accompanied by summaries and interpretations. Where relevant, respondents' free-text entries are quoted to illustrate recurrent topics and perspectives. Direct quotations are labelled to indicate whether a parent/carer, a school leader (principal/deputy principal) or a teacher (class teacher, SET teacher) provided the text. Responses from the free text in surveys reflect the perspectives of various respondents. This evaluation avoids reporting multiple free-text contributions from the same individual, to ensure a wide representation of views.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and case studies is presented in a narrative format supported by excerpts from interviews, conversations and student maps. To support this narrative approach, vignettes from the case-study data are presented as illustrations of how themes were active in context.

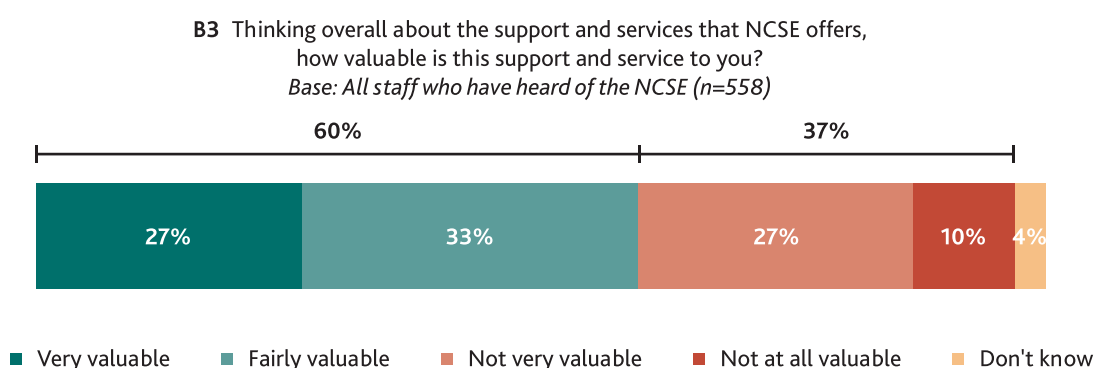
Subtheme: 'The value of additional supports enabled/delivered by the NCSE's frontline services'

Data from this subtheme represents the value that participants place on the support and additional resources provided through the NCSE's frontline services. It starts with the findings drawn from the survey of school staff.

Subtheme: 'The value of additional supports enabled/delivered by the NCSE's frontline services: online survey of school staff'

In the survey of school staff, a large majority of respondents (87 per cent) regarded NCSE support as either 'valuable' (60 per cent) or 'very valuable' (27 per cent). Just over a quarter (27 per cent) felt the support or service was not very valuable and 10 per cent thought it was not at all valuable.

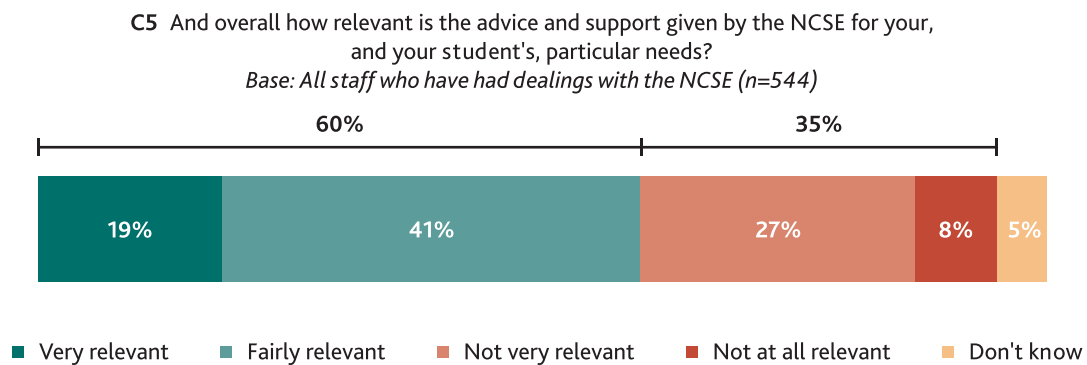
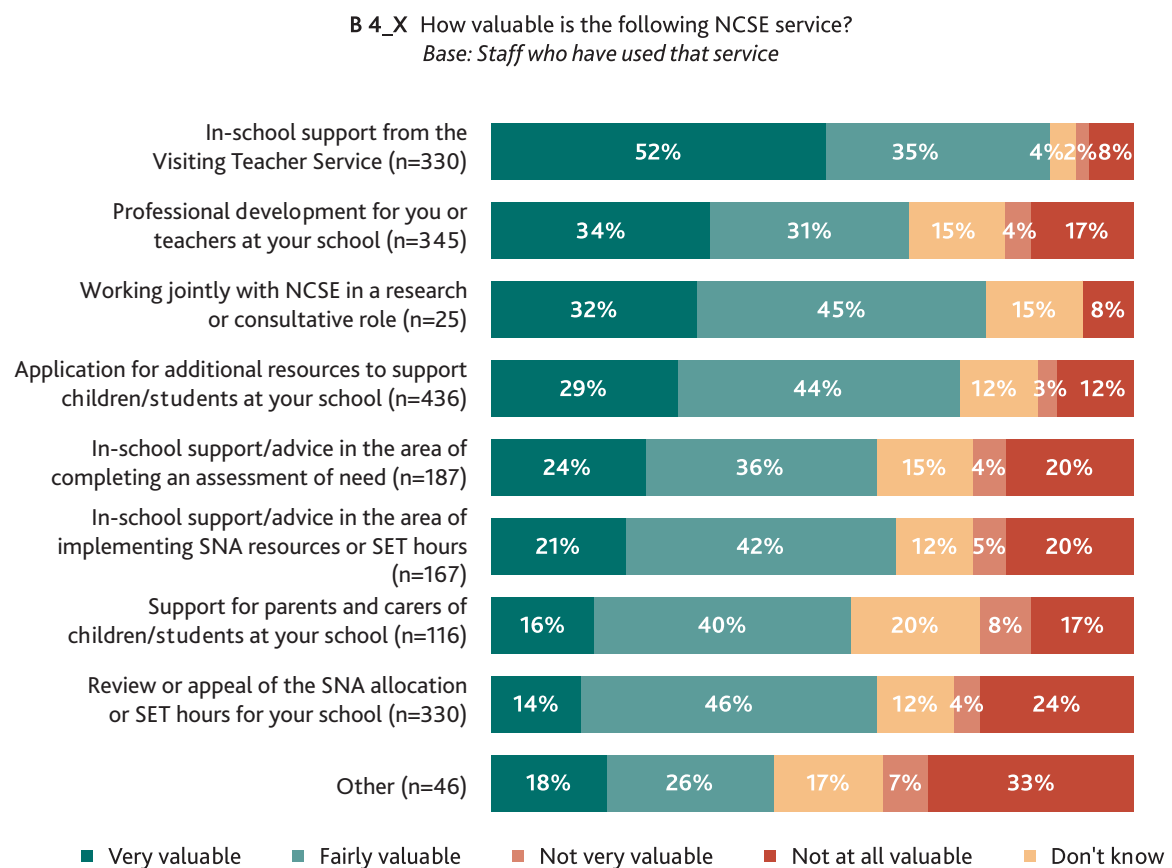
Figure 7.1: Value of NCSE Support



Most staff who perceived that services were 'not valuable' felt that they had not received enough of them for the support to be tangible. This was an important recurrent theme that is further discussed under the subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency':

There's a lack of resources being given to school in SET and SNA area ... we are begging for more help for the most vulnerable children and the children are suffering the most with the lack of training. (Teacher)

When evaluating the advice and support given by the NCSE's broad range of services (for example the NCSE advisory service, TPL, guides/resources), the majority believed it was relevant for their school and students' particular needs. Six out of 10 felt that the advice and support was relevant and either 'fairly relevant' (41 per cent) or 'very relevant' (19 per cent). Around a third (35 per cent) suggested that they were 'not relevant', with a further 8 per cent saying they were 'not at all relevant' (Figure 7.2a). Figure 7.2b breaks down respondent perceptions of the value of different services.

Figure 7.2a: Value and relevance of advice and support provided by services (overall)**Figure 7.2b: Value of different services (overall)**

Referring to Figure 7.2b, in-school support from the VTS was deemed either 'fairly valuable' (31 per cent) or 'very valuable' (52 per cent), meaning that 83 per cent of respondents perceived its value positively. Similarly, TPL was deemed either 'very valuable' (34 per cent) or 'fairly valuable' (45 per cent) by nearly nine out of 10 (89 per cent) of respondents. Respondents gave frequent positive mentions of the value of the VTS, praising their knowledge and the impact they have on the children they work with, in particular by helping them to address sensory needs and tailoring their individual support:

Support from Visiting Teachers is helpful as the Visiting Teachers have good knowledge of their areas and also look at specific pupils. (Leader)

The only service deemed valuable by fewer than 50 per cent of respondents was the review or appeal of the SNA allocation of SET hours for the school. Twenty per cent felt it was not very valuable and two fifths (41 per cent) thought it was not at all valuable. There may be a relationship between these perceptions and the outcome of applications (meaning that perceptions may be more positive when the outcome of the review is to award the requested resource), but this cannot be discerned from the data here. However, data from case studies and in-depth interviews suggests that this is the case, as explained in the findings for Theme 1. A fifth of staff (20 per cent) thought that in-school support for implementing SNA resources or SET hours was not at all valuable. Data contained in themes 2,3 or 4 may explain this negative perception.

In terms of overall satisfaction with the support and services offered by NCSE, a minority (8 per cent) were very satisfied and 30 per cent were satisfied, whereas 32 per cent were not very satisfied and 29 per cent were not at all satisfied (as shown in Figure 7.3). This means that a majority (61 per cent) of school staff were dissatisfied.

Figure 7.3a: School staff satisfaction with NCSE services (overall)

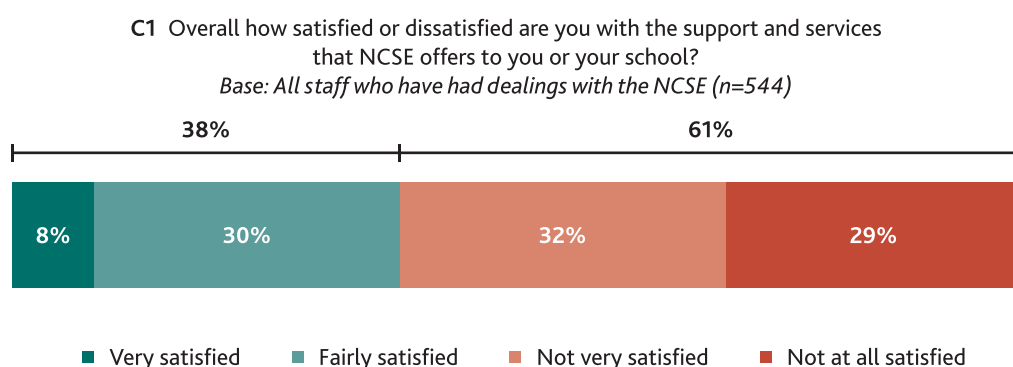


Figure 7.3 follows and breaks school staff satisfaction down by each service.

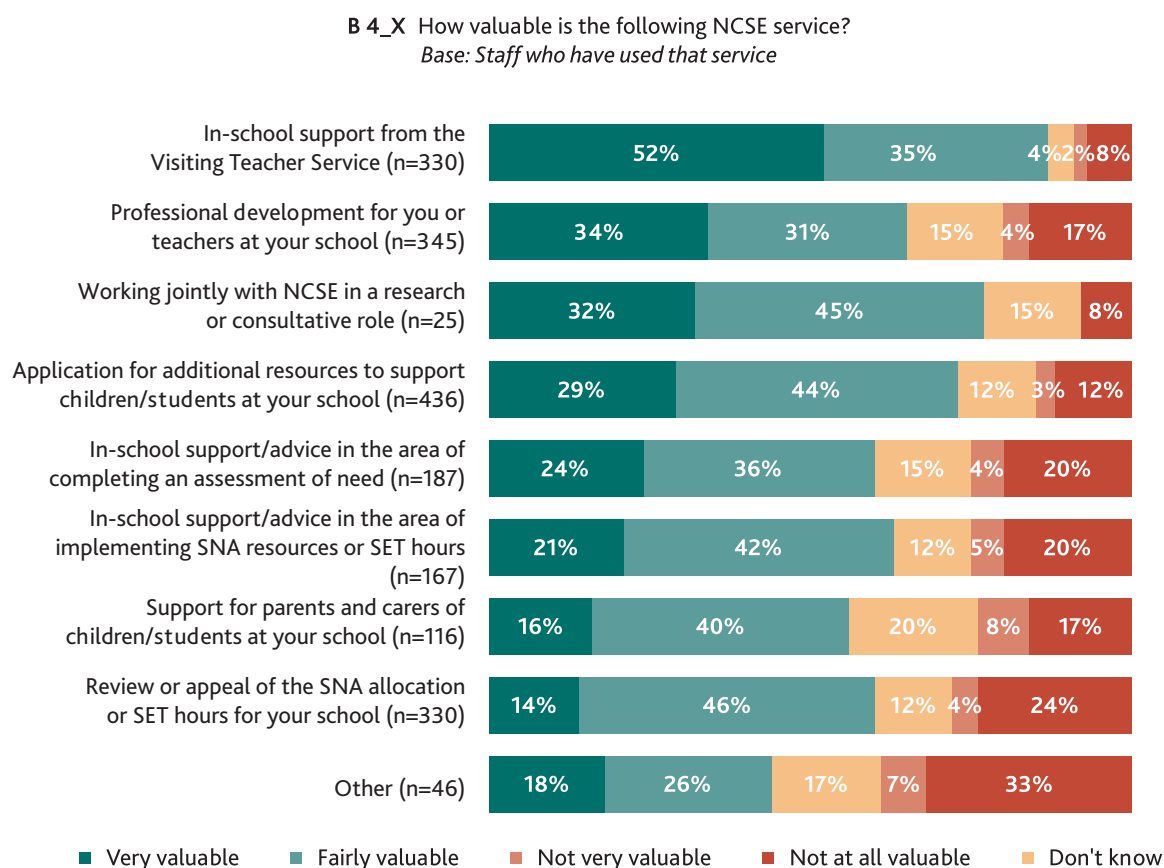
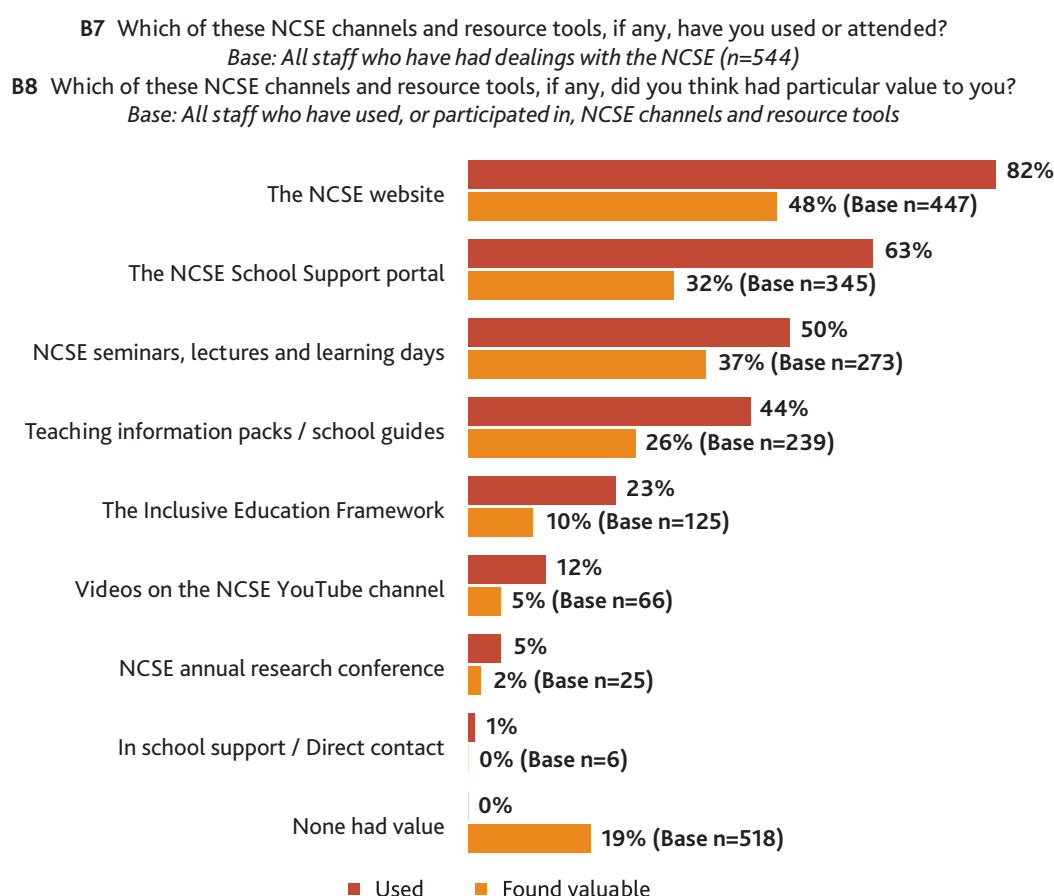
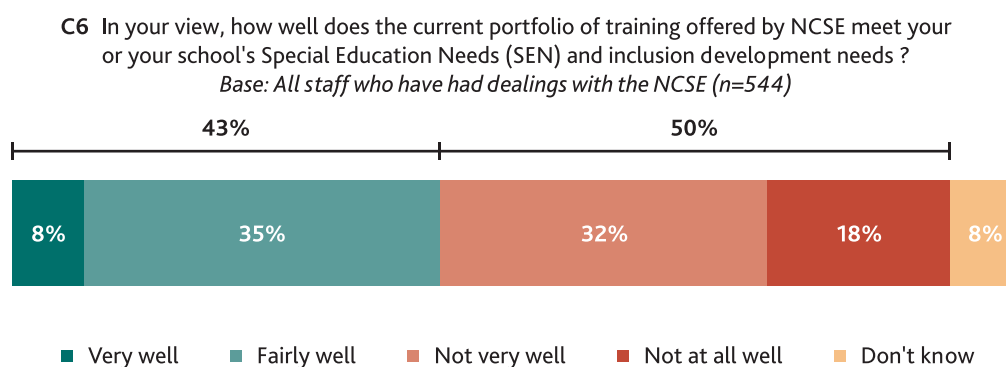
Figure 7.3b: School staff satisfaction NCSE services (specific services)

Figure 7.3b shows that levels of staff satisfaction with the value of individual NCSE frontline services were high for the VTS, with 73 per cent reporting positively. Satisfaction was also relatively high for TPL, working in a research or consultative role, applications for additional resources, in-school support and advice on implementing SNA and SET resources and support to parents. The category 'other' included assistive technology and equipment. Generally, this shows that in most cases (apart from SNA and SET appeals), a majority of school staff were satisfied with the value that specific NCSE services deliver, though dissatisfied with the NCSE as an organisation overall.

In terms of use of NCSE resources, as shown in Figure 7.4, the NCSE website was the most used NCSE channel or resource for information. The majority (82 per cent) had used it. Just under half (48 per cent) thought it was valuable. Just under two-thirds (63 per cent) had used the NCSE School Support Portal; a third of these (32 per cent) found it to be a valuable resource. Half of respondents (50 per cent) attended NCSE seminars, lectures or learning days; over a third (37 per cent) of these found them to be valuable. It is important to note that while the NCSE website was the resource deemed to be most useful by those who had used it, positive perceptions of value were still below half (48 per cent).

Figure 7.4: Resources used and perceived value

The relatively low take-up of training resources (50 per cent) could be explained by the fact that 43 per cent of respondents felt that the current portfolio of training offered by the NCSE met their school's SEN needs, while 50 per cent thought it did not. A minority (18 per cent) felt it did not meet them at all well (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5: Extent to which portfolio of training meets needs

When asked why it did not meet their needs, the respondents most commonly stated that they could not find substitute teachers to cover attendance (63 per cent; Figure 7.6). The next most common answer was the related reason that it was difficult to find time to attend. While these factors are not attributable to NCSE, they do indicate contexts of interest to continuous improvement. A total of 43 per cent of those who felt their needs were not met thought TPL provision believed that it was not sufficiently tailored to their needs and 40 per cent felt that training was not at a convenient location. In the open-ended responses, some staff commented that the training was good in theory but did not reflect the actual resources available to the school. Therefore, it was not something that could be implemented in practice because without necessary resources, it was not possible to make the suggestions work:

There is no point providing training to class teachers if the proper SNA support and SET support is not provided to meet the needs of special needs in the school. (Leader)

Figure 7.6: Reasons for training portfolio not meeting needs

C7 Why does the portfolio of training offered by NCSE not meet your or your school's Special Education Needs (SEN) and inclusion development needs?
Base: Staff who believe that the NCSE training portfolio does not meet their, or their school's, needs (n=460)



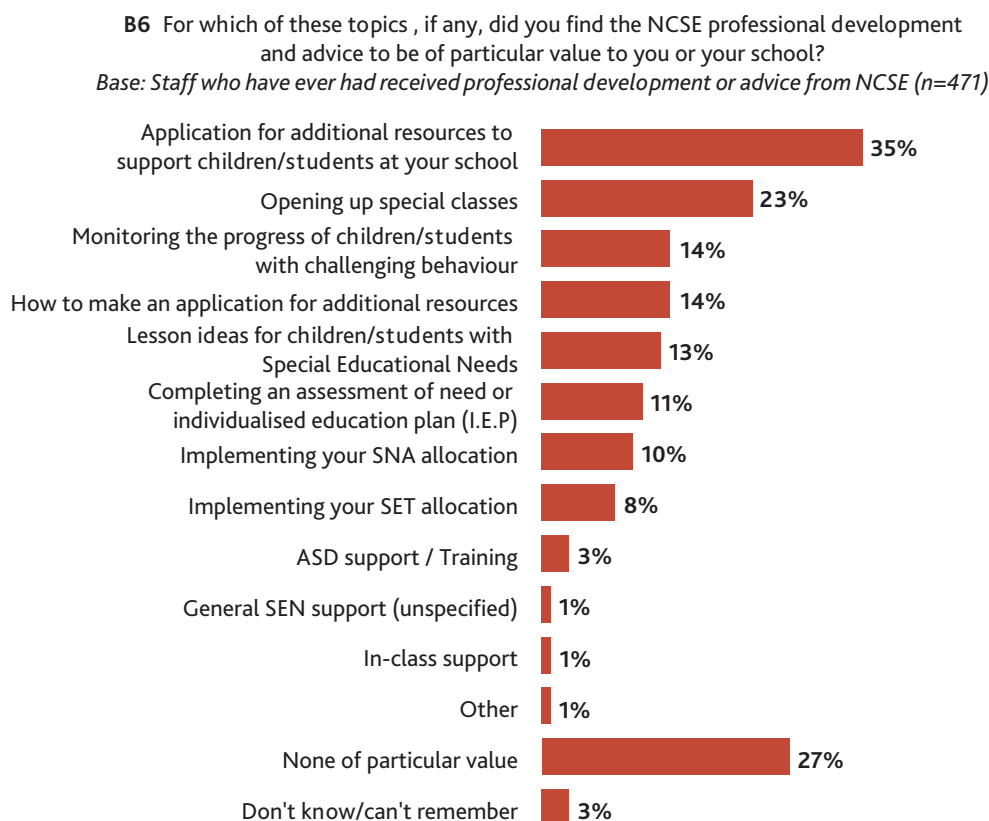
Returning to responses to options in the survey, of those who had received TPL or advice from NCSE services, just over a third of school staff (35 per cent) thought that challenging behaviour was a valuable topic (Figure 7.7). Around a quarter (23 per cent) thought that opening special classes was valuable. Scores then dropped: 14 per cent found monitoring the progress of children/students with challenging behaviour was valuable, 14 per cent found advice on how to make an application for additional resources was a valuable topic, and for 13 per cent, advice on lesson ideas for SEN children was considered a valuable topic.

One of the reasons given for a perceived lack of benefit was that front line staff were not knowledgeable enough and required training to be able to undertake the challenging nuanced work involved in developing teacher knowledge and practice around inclusion:

The SENO system is currently not fit for purpose. Many do not have educational backgrounds. There is disparity between how different schools in different counties are treated or resources. (Leader)

There is an overwhelming lack of understanding of how to provide and sustain special education in mainstream schools by the NCSE. (Leader)

Figure 7.7: Value of professional development and advice by topic



Subtheme: 'The value of additional supports enabled/delivered by the NCSE's frontline services in the qualitative data'

The findings from the case studies demonstrate that participants place value on NCSE's frontline services. However, perceptions of value are mediated by the degree to which participants deem the amount of support to be sufficient. This is discussed in more depth in the subsection related to the subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency and insufficiency'. The following quotations from the case-study data illustrate the extent to which NCSE supports were considered valuable:

I like having a 'base' classroom for the beginning of the school day and at lunch time.

My SNA supports me in class when I need it. (Student, mainstream post-primary school)

Overall, my child's needs for the last decade have been well met here. (parent, special school)

Having an umbrella figure like the NCSE just gives confidence all round for us.

(Principal, mainstream primary School)

Many school staff in the case studies highlighted the value of the services provided by the NCSE. For example, they appreciated the support in securing additional SNA resources through SENOs, access to TPL, and the availability of guidelines, advice and website resources. Staff also valued the VTS service and the improved understanding of the continuum of support it provided. A principal in a special school summarised the NCSE's flexibility in tailoring TPL to meet each school's specific needs:

We have been quite innovative with the NCSE. We have worked on developing programmes ourselves with the NCSE in areas that we needed. For example, there is a severe lack of information on particular areas of deafness and mental health in Ireland...and then we got services on that in school. We devised in-school support for ourselves and another school. We had a whole-day in-service from the NCSE here. (Principal, special school)

While school staff perceived that parents/carers have limited communication with the NCSE, schools saw themselves as a conduit for interaction between the NCSE and parents/carers, and felt that this was a role it was important to own:

Our decisions would be communicated directly to the families. And we would give the rationale. We would say this is from the NCSE. I am looking now at the document I sent out, the Learning Profile, that's directly from the NCSE. We feel that this is best practice going forward. (SEN coordinator, mainstream post-primary)

Understandably, students who participated in the case studies did not comment directly on the value they placed on NCSE frontline services. Nonetheless, all students articulated their value in the sense of belonging to the school community during participatory encounters with the TRs. The challenges experienced by students in transitioning throughout the school day and to post-primary level were scaffolded by school staff through SNA support, visual schedules, discussions and arranging visits to the post-primary school. One student described their feelings about starting post-primary school:

Scared and worried – those are the biggest two problems. Because I'm going to miss all my friends, that's a part of worried. And scared that there is a bunch of people who are 18 and 16 and all the bigger ages. I'm scared. It's like going back to junior infants. (Student in sixth class, mainstream primary school)

The school had responded through arranging a visit to the post-primary school for the student to mitigate the worry he had articulated in relation to transferring to a different school context. In the context of NCSE support and advice, what a school does to support pupils with SENs makes a substantial difference.

While the supports and resources accessed by schools through the NCSE were valued, participants perceived that these supports were not sufficient in terms of the level of support needed nor the capacity-building support that schools required in order to respond adequately to the needs of all students. A school leader described this in terms of what could be achieved if there had been sufficiency in the system:

Essentially, it was a wasted opportunity. It could have been brilliant, but they don't have the staffing to make it brilliant and it should be brilliant. You look at other countries where this is the norm. It just works and it's seamless... I don't want hints and tips. If I want a kid who cannot speak to be able to speak, I don't have the capability of doing that. And some speech and language therapist coming twice a year saying 'try that or try that' isn't the same as a speech and language therapist working directly with a child. (Principal, mainstream primary school)

When combined, the corpus data provides evidence of the high value that stakeholders place on the supports and resources provided by the NCSE's frontline services. The scale of value is mediated by perceptions of sufficiency or insufficiency, most notably where participants perceive the amount or frequency of support to be too small to make a difference. This is reported in more detail in the next subtheme.

The vignette below represents the experience of a 7-year-old student attending a mainstream primary school. It illustrates the value of the additional supports enabled/delivered by the NCSE's frontline services in context.

Vignette Theme 3: 'The right support at the right time and in the right place': CYP9, 7 years old

Introduction

CYP9 attended a mainstream mixed primary vertical school with a rural DEIS designation. The term 'vertical school' refers to a school containing both junior and senior classes.

A total of 56 of 175 enrolled students had disabilities/additional needs. Numbers had recently doubled due to the enrolment of Ukrainian students. CYP9 was 7 years old and in first class. They presented with speech, language and communication needs. Articulation was reported as the most significant area of difficulty by CYP9's teachers and parents. Support is being accessed at the School Support Plus level and CYP9 has been referred for a psychological assessment.

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

CYP9 has positive feelings towards their classmates, teachers, activities and their learning environment. Their artwork is displayed throughout the school along with that of other children. The classroom and the yard are meaningful areas for CYP9, as captured on their map. Their favourite activity is playing with classmates as represented by the inclusion on the map of the game 'sharks and fishes'. They displayed a positive self-concept by depicting themselves at the other side of the yard as they were 'very fast' and able to run quickly. Lunch was noted as another favourite activity as CYP9 looks forward to the food. They report feeling good in class and spoke about doing their workbooks and learning about time with their teacher. When CYP9 realised that they had omitted the teacher from their map, they were quick to include them. They also spoke positively about class prizes and the Class Teddy, which one child gets to take home each Friday. They spoke about liking how big their classroom is although 'the roof is broken'. Although CYP9 attends the SET room daily, for small group instruction, they did not reature this room on the map. In conversation, they noted that they liked the room because it was 'big and cool and beautiful'. The SET reports that CYP9 works well in the small group learning context in the SET room. Support is focused on social skills development and language and literacy support. CYP9 also receives in-class support from an SNA. Staff seemed well attuned to CYP's learning needs and interests, including numbers and the Marvel franchise.

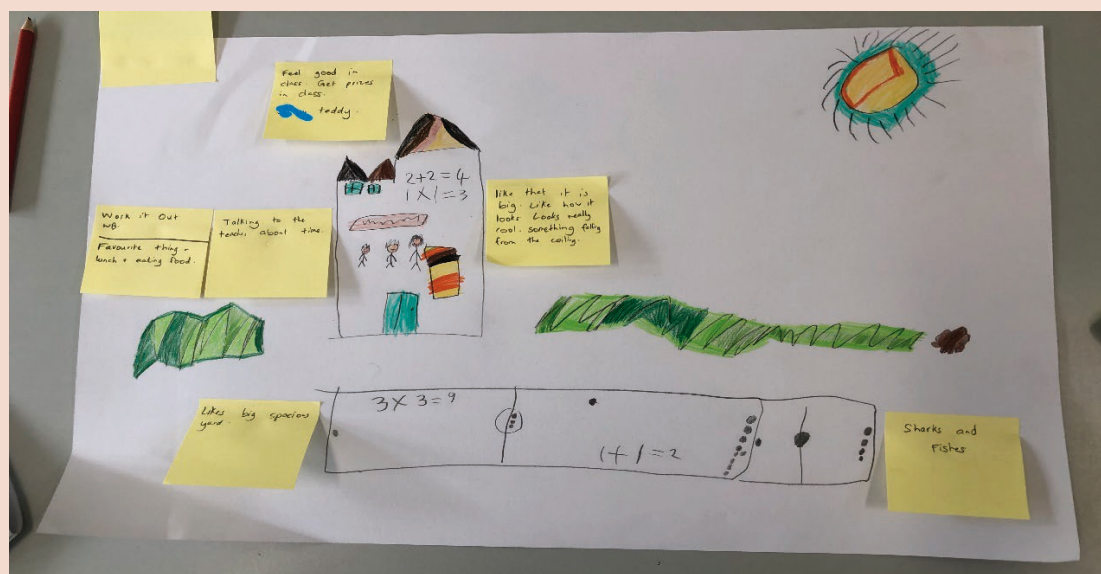


Figure 3. CYP9's map of the school and yard with their teacher and classmates

CYP9's parent feels that their child is being well supported, although they do not seem to be overly familiar with the role of the NCSE in their child's education. Parents, class teacher and SET appear to have a positive collaborative working relationship. They have recently met to discuss CYP9's student support plan.

Conclusion

The supports currently being provided are key enablers of CYP9's meaningful inclusion in their school. CYP9's positive education experience is clearly being influenced by the impact of these additional supports across the multiple dimensions reported.

Subtheme: 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support'

The terms 'sufficiency' and 'insufficiency' in this subsection refer to participants' perceptions of shortages in resources (for example insufficient allocations of SNAs, staff recruitment crises) or their perceptions of there being enough resources (for example SETs). For the most part, participants perceived insufficiencies.

Subtheme: 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support in the qualitative data'

During in-depth interviews, most school staff and NCSE staff highlighted the national context as a major factor affecting students' access to timely support. One NCSE staff member noted, 'There are hundreds of vacancies in children's services... children aren't getting the support they need, so parents are looking to schools to fill the gap' (Senior member of NCSE staff, in-depth interview). Participants also emphasised staffing limitations within the NCSE, with one senior staff member stating, 'Schools value visiting teachers but need more of them... we have 29 whole-time equivalents for the visually impaired... it's not nearly enough' (Senior member of NCSE staff, SENO, in-depth interview). Despite these challenges, NCSE staff acknowledged the expansion of support, with one noting, 'There are nearly 20,000 SNAs in the system because [NCSE, SENOs and schools] made a case for them' (Senior member of NCSE staff, SENO, in-depth interview).

Some school staff raised concerns about the limited availability of TPL, describing it as oversubscribed and lacking in variety. However, a few staff members found the allocation of SET to be fair. In contrast, parent/carer surveys highlighted the importance of assistive technologies for positive outcomes, although access was often delayed by inefficient systems. One parent explained, 'The allocation of assistive technology needs an overhaul... it takes too long, and the process is laborious' (Parent/carer). Parents/carers also discussed recruitment challenges and staff shortages affecting their child's support, with one parent saying, 'We're waiting for a public diagnosis to get SLT or OT... but even private waiting lists are 10 months to a year' (Parent/carer 5, child in mainstream class, specific learning difficulties and undiagnosed ASD, mixed to positive sentiment).

A majority of parents/carers commented on insufficient SNA support, often due to the allocation model, which assigns SNAs to schools rather than individual children. One school principal explained the difficulty: 'It's incredibly difficult to increase SNAs in a secondary school... we have 107 students and one SNA full-time' (School Principal 7, post-primary, mainstream, negative sentiment). However, some noted that the exceptional review process helped address such gaps. An NCSE staff member explained that schools can apply for a review if their allocation is insufficient for their student population. (Senior member of NCSE staff, in-depth interview).

In case studies, participants' perceptions of support varied depending on their engagement with NCSE services. However, many raised concerns about insufficient TPL, therapeutic support and SNA access. While participants valued professional learning opportunities, one principal remarked, 'Training has become more generic... there isn't enough time or staff to support the rapid expansion of autism-specific classes' (Principal, mainstream primary school). SNAs also reported limited access to professional learning, as summarised by an SNA in a special school:

It's worse than it used to be. The general views of everybody are that 'gosh it was so much better'. And look I get that because when we started off there were very few autism-specific classes and now there [are] 10 times the amount of them now and they have to train people quickly. There [are] a lot more people to train, and they have to do it quickly. The result of that is you are getting worse training, more generic training. (SNA, special school)

The subtheme is also active in the case of a special school that had accessed a range of TPL through the NCSE, including the SCERTS® model. The principal observed that the teachers had found this opportunity 'very informative, very helpful', noting that they had 'brought some of the SCERTS® training into the school'. However, the principal also reported that while the school uses the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children) model, she has not been able to access TPL in the TEACCH approach and had TPL for one teacher only on the PEP-3 (Psychoeducational profile – 3rd edition) and VB-MAPP (Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment and Placement Programme) development opportunities. She further criticised the focus of TPL being in the junior section of the school, with fewer opportunities available for teachers in the senior school. Commenting on the data-collection instruments for the case studies, the principal's remark was indicative of the perceptions of school staff regarding insufficiency:

I see support written on this summary of information and I do not feel one bit supported. (Principal, special school).

It was evident in the case studies that participants were aware of the impact of wider staff shortages, such as in therapeutic services. Perceptions of insufficiency articulated in relation to access to the role of the NCSE regarding the availability of appropriate therapeutic and assessment supports were inextricably linked to the broader national policy context and the lack of cross-sectoral support, described by a parent/carer of a child in a special school as having 'fallen apart':

The school is part of a Child Disability Network team that has fallen apart.... there are two people left in the team, we have nobody in psychology, we have one OT, the physio is working between primary care and the Child Disability Network team, and we have some physio support and one there is one SLT and there is no manager. (Parent/carer, special school)

The parent/carer concluded that it would be 'amazing' if the NCSE was 'going to come on board with some of those therapy services', noting that at this stage that was what 'was really needed'.

The management of the allocation of SNAs was described as a 'huge issue' by one of two teachers from a special school who participated in the case study. Both teachers further posited that the SENO observing children on one visit is insufficient to decide on the requirement for SNA support and leading to a perception that 'budgetary constraints' determine the level of SNA support allocated. This concern was echoed by parents/carers who believed that SNA support was pivotal in ensuring their child was supported to achieve their potential during their education experience:

He hasn't had access to an SNA, although it has been requested. Over the last couple of years, as he's gotten older, his organisational skills have been very poor. He'd come home with the wrong books. For example, he might only need three books for homework, but he could have 15 in his bag. I couldn't take them out because he might need them at school the next day, and the weight of the bag was a concern. On several occasions, I asked if he could get SNA support for 5 or 10 minutes just to ensure he brought home the right materials, but it never happened. They don't have the resources or the time. Many nights there wouldn't have been any homework done if not for the fact that he is a twin, and his twin had the correct books with him. (Parent/carer, mainstream primary school).

Further accounts of participants' perceptions of insufficient support were contained in the data for Theme 3 and are explored in what follows.

Subtheme: 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support: online survey of parents/carers'

In the survey of parents/carers, some expressed the feeling that their children had received incorrect or inappropriate allocations or support. Some parents/carers had lost faith in the allocation process, particularly when they perceived placements to be inappropriate, leading to negative impacts on the child and increased stress for the parents/carers. These parents/carers felt that they were not receiving the right support at the right time:

SENO wrongly advised/placed my daughter in a new autism unit where staff were learning on the job causing incredible stress to all especially vulnerable young pupils. (Parent/carer)

A few parents/carers expressed concern that decisions were made without properly assessing the nuanced needs of their child. There was some acceptance that a lack of resources was contributing to this, but parents/carers perceived that reviews were not detailed enough and failed to fully incorporate all aspects of their child's needs.

... the review did not look at my child's needs on a whole...it felt like the school had to fight for every minute to prove they needed support to allow my child to access their education. With SNA they were only interested in primary care needs when secondary care needs are [a] priority for my child, and they cannot cope in school without these being met. (Parent/carer)

Another parent/carer reported that their child was placed in a mainstream school, which they felt had negative consequences:

She recommended putting him into mainstream until an ASD class became available which has completely inappropriate, against child rights and would cause psychological and emotional harm. (Parent/carer)

These examples tend to demonstrate how some parents/carers perceive insufficiencies in the time and deliberation given to reviews of their children's needs.

Subtheme: 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment'

The subtheme of 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment', like other subthemes, is present in all data types (survey, interviews and case studies). It is reported here because it was described by many participants as a central in their interaction with NCSE frontline services. Most NCSE staff (in-depth interviews) also talked about processes and bureaucracy as a demanding feature of their working lives. This subtheme also has latent relevance because when participants referred to bureaucracy, they were talking about its negative impacts on them, and how it was experienced as a barrier to positive interaction with NCSE frontline services or, in the case of NCSE staff themselves, a barrier to giving more time to schools and families.

Beginning with the survey of parents/carers, many respondents felt that there was too much bureaucracy in application processes (for exceptional reviews or findings special school places), particularly among those who felt they did not get enough support in making the application. This then became another source of stress. For example, in the case of applying for exceptional reviews:

... it added another layer of bureaucracy to a process and added additional stress to the situation. (Parent/carer)

As well as delays, the nature of the application paperwork itself meant that some parents/carers felt they were unable to put forward a comprehensive case for their child:

In a SENO review in the school, when I completed the paperwork for the school as it didn't give me space to fully explain all her difficulties and disabilities, I asked that the SENO contact me. I was not contacted. (Parent/carer)

A stressful and sometimes daunting endeavour, parents/carers would like to see the application process made smoother and quicker with additional support:

A centralised application system for special schools and classes with transport included with same. (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers felt that there was too much work to find potential schools and resources, and then to ascertain what was available and for what they could realistically apply. Some talked of having a central system with all this information collated and easy to digest:

A system should be put in place for parents applying to ASD units that shows what schools have availability. It's degrading having to apply to so many schools and to keep getting refusals. It's frustrating to tell their siblings that their brother can't go to the same school as them and has to go outside of his locality to source a place, which we haven't even secured a place as of yet. (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers would also like the process to be quicker and to be kept informed. It should also be streamlined to limit the potential amount of distress for the child:

Children should not need to take another assessment after being diagnosed by an ed[ucational] psychologist in order to carry out their recommendations. The psychological impact of this can't be good, e.g. the humiliation of a second assessment. (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers reported that delays were a big problem and would like to see these mitigated by better forward planning, creating better application processes. Some parents criticised a lack of external governance in how resources are being used and felt this was a stumbling block in being able to better manage and allocate resource effectively.

They would also like to see plans being made years in advance to avoid a reactive and slow allocation process – they are perhaps unaware of the way that the NCSE does already engage in this fore planning:

They should be active in ensuring there are sufficient appropriate school places, 2-3 years in advance. In doing so, they give time for building works, training, staff hiring etc., are ALL in place prior to the child starting school. (Parent/carer)

Having found it difficult to identify available resources, and finding it to be a time-consuming and stressful exercise when coming from a non-professional background, several parents/carers also felt would also be helpful to better track and communicate available resources to make this more efficient:

Have a list of school placements coming up. Very little point in applying to lots of schools when there's no spaces in them. It's crazy and all wrapped up in red tape. Making parents waste time filling out forms and applying for places that are not there. Have a list of each place available in all the schools so parents can then apply. (Parent/carer)

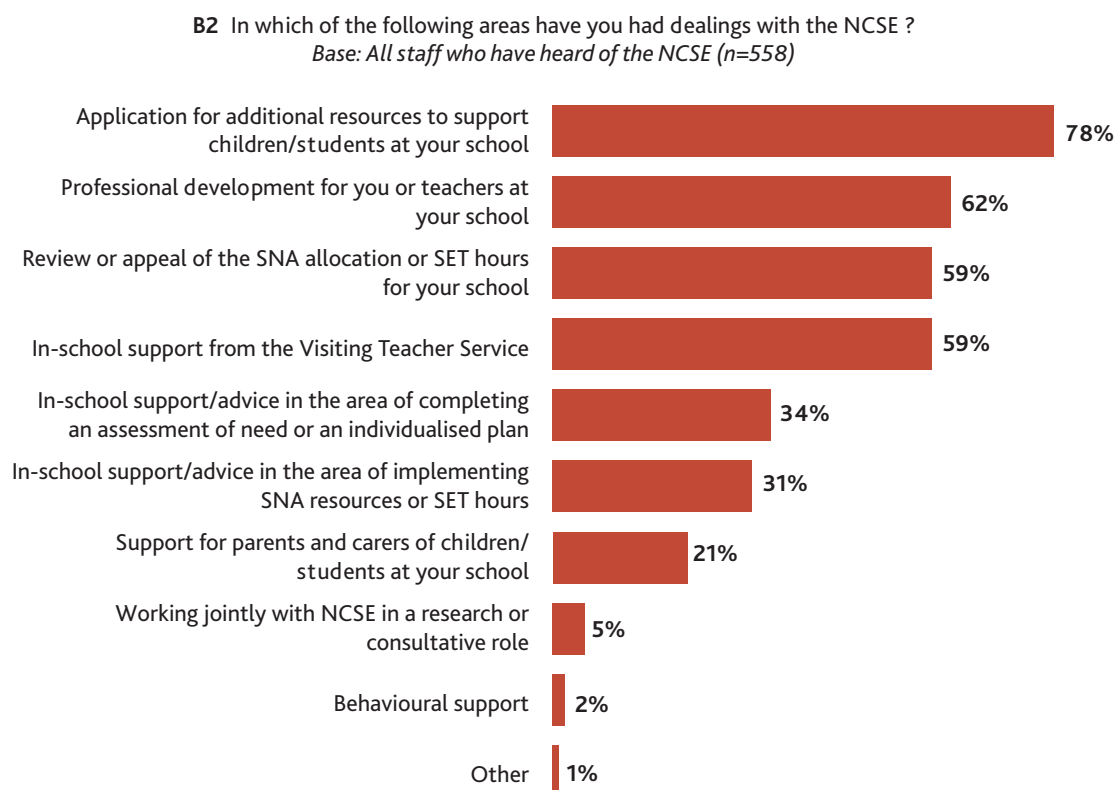
With great uncertainty over the status of applications, the process of making decisions and the justification for those decisions, several parents/carers called for more transparent and timely explanations to be shared with them. There were instances of applications for assistive technologies being turned down without substantial evidence being provided to parents/carers as to why:

Detailed reports on why a child, with recommendations from a qualified psychologist for an SNA, was refused the proper recommended support by a member of the NCSE should be made available to parents. The SENOs should be held more accountable for their decisions.
(Parent/carers)

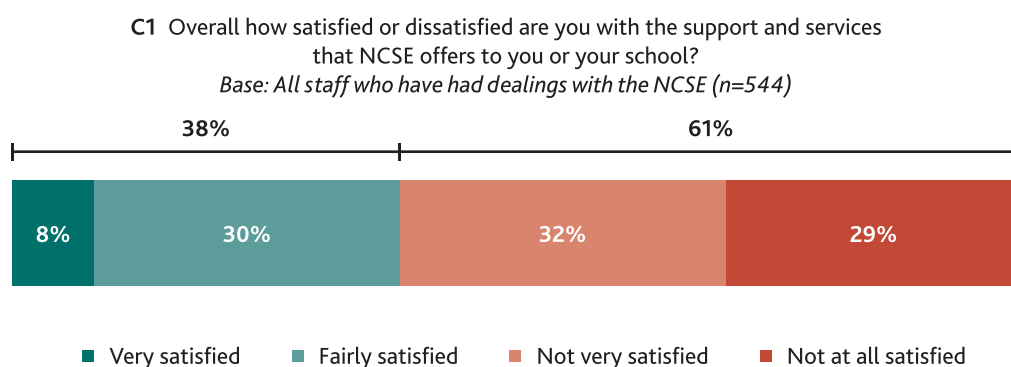
These perceptions echo the concerns stakeholders have about trust and transparency in the system, and this is further explained in Section 8 (Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis) understanding').

Subtheme: 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment: online survey of school staff'

In the case of school staff responding in the survey, bureaucracy and workload were also observed to be relevant to participants' sentiments towards the NCSE and its frontline services. In the survey, the most common reason (78 per cent of respondents) for schools to work with the NCSE was on applications for additional resources to support children/students at the school. The majority (62 per cent) dealt with NCSE for TPL. The next two most common reasons for interacting with NCSE were to review or appeal SNA or SET allocation at the school and in-school support from the VTS (both 59 per cent). The full list of interactions with NCSE can be seen below in Figure 7.8.

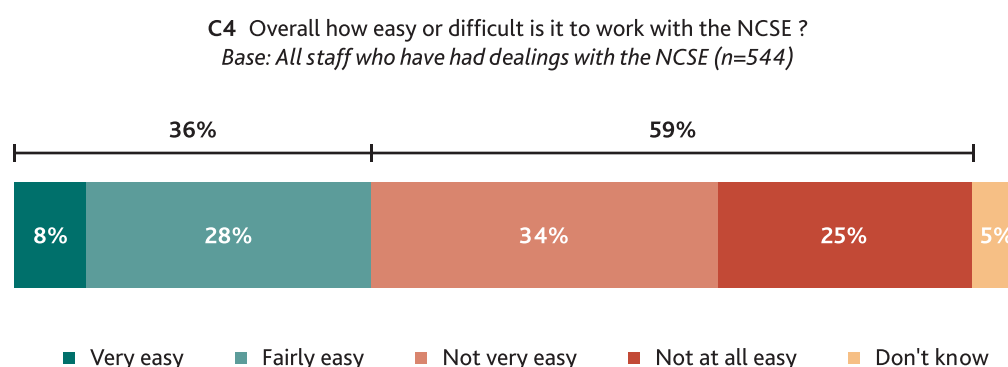
Figure 7.8: Dealings with NCSE

In terms of satisfaction with the support and services offered by NCSE, only 8 per cent of staff were 'very satisfied' and 30 per cent were 'fairly satisfied', whereas 32 per cent were 'not very satisfied' and 29 per cent were 'not at all satisfied' (Figure 7.9).

Figure 7.9: Overall satisfaction with NCSE services

Around a third (36 per cent) of staff reported that the NCSE were easy to work with and 8 per cent suggested that they were 'very easy' to work with. However, well over half (59 per cent) thought they were either 'not very easy' or 'not at all easy' (Figure 7.10).

Figure 7.10: Ease of working with NCSE



One of the key reasons why respondents found NCSE less easy to work with was that they found their processes onerous. The evidence required and the forms that needed to be completed were deemed complex and hard to deliver on top of other job role responsibilities:

In theory, the NCSE offer great services but in reality, as a developing school we have to submit exceptional reviews to receive SNA support when our school enrolment is growing each year for the next three years. It is too much paperwork and the child in most need is suffering and waiting on places as we can't guarantee them access to an SNA. (Leader)

Some staff felt that these processes were not well explained and created the feeling that some parts of the application were superfluous, which was challenging, given their work commitments. The result was that they did not feel they were able to apply for this much-needed resource, making their decision based on previous negative experiences.

[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)

As well as the process being too arduous for many, there was criticism over the lack of support being provided and lack of transparency over the decision-making process. The feeling that the NCSE was not being held accountable was a frustration for several staff members:

The process by which additional SNA support is sought is unwieldy and fraught with uncertainty as there is no clarity or consistency in how the process is conducted. There are no clear criteria or methods of practice resulting in schools spending multiples of hours preparing for a visit, with staff unsure whether they will be included in the process or not. (Leader)

During in-depth interviews with school staff, a few participants described the process as fair, even though not all had been awarded the support applied for. A majority were critical of the exceptional review process and gave a range of reasons for the concerns including the onerous workload, and as they perceived it, the low likelihood of success. Some believed that the workload involved in the process of an exceptional review for SNAs was designed to disincentivise schools from applying. A school principal expressed frustration with the process of applying for additional support, noting that the paperwork and delays make principals question if it is worth the effort. The principal said, 'You go through all this paperwork to be told... it's just another delay... hurdles you need to jump over.' They also highlighted the risk involved, explaining that requesting a review of SNA allocations might result in reduced support, which they described as a significant threat (School principal, primary mainstream with special class(es), mixed sentiment). This reflects concerns about bureaucratic obstacles and the potential for reduced resources when seeking additional support.

During in-depth interviews, NCSE staff also mentioned complicated processes of approval with some challenges arising from double-layered approval, first from the SENO, then from the DE, who might return an application because 'the SENO didn't tick this one box' (NCSE staff, in-depth interview, specialist lead). Administrative burden was recognised as necessary in the context of policies and procedures, but some NCSE staff identified that the burden of cumbersome processes was taking their time up, when it could be used on supporting schools.

One NCSE staff member emphasised the challenges teachers face post-COVID-19, citing teacher shortages, stress and lack of time. They expressed frustration with bureaucratic demands, stating, 'this [paperwork] is such a waste of time', even though they acknowledged the need for procedures. The strain of balancing student needs with administrative tasks was described as 'really, really challenging' (NCSE staff, in-depth interviews, VT). This highlights the tension between necessary administrative processes and the practical difficulties teachers face in managing their workload.

Most participants in the case studies perceived interactions with the NCSE as involving unnecessarily complex and protracted bureaucratic processes. There was a sense of shifting goalposts in relation to application processes and an unnecessary administration burden being placed on schools. Parents/carers and school staff perceived an absence of autonomy both on the part of schools and SENOs. Specifically, the processes related to applications for the exceptional review process, and securing assessments and resources, were perceived as being excessively bureaucratic.

The principal of a primary school described the portal as 'cumbersome' and the exceptional review process as 'arduous', 'resulting in the generation of a significant workload and paperwork'. Concern was expressed by this principal that the SENO's visit to the school would involve the SENO spending a short time with the principal and most of the time with the SNAs. The overriding perception that the bureaucratic measures were designed to be barriers to eliciting resources was captured by the principal's query as to:

... why would they need to talk to the SNAs...it would almost seem like a checking thing. So that is an overriding feeling that you have, it is always checking, checking, checking. (Principal, mainstream primary school)

In this context, reference was also made to the delays in being informed of decisions related to the sanctioning of resources, a situation that was described as frustrating and inhibiting schools in planning for the school year ahead. For example, the following perspectives were related by participants in the case studies. A special school principal highlighted the complexity of securing school transport, noting that the process involves multiple agencies and can be quite lengthy: 'It has to go through so many different agencies ... so it's quite a process' (Principal, special school). A parent/carer echoed this, stressing the importance of reducing bureaucracy: 'The less bureaucracy ... between the school and the NCSE ... the more benefit ... for the children' (Parent/carer, special school). Similarly, a teacher described the frustrations of administrative delays and repeated efforts to secure support: 'It's a constant need to justify your needs ... gathering information, completing documents ... and it can be very hard to actually just get an answer' (Teacher, special school). These examples illustrate how administrative burdens can delay support, despite the best efforts of schools and parents.

Related to this theme was an issue raised by a principal in a special school who noted the impact of equipment and technology sanctioned by the NCSE. However, in order to optimise students' experience in school, the principal referred to the importance of these resources being used by students and families at home:

One of the big things that I have an issue with here and it's massive. Our school spends thousands on this specific equipment through the Department, but it goes on our school insurance and if those children lose it, then it's our school insurance that is impacted. (Principal, special school)

Reference was made to the systems for accessing resources changing a number of times over the last few years and becoming increasingly unwieldy and complex.

Summary

This section has presented the findings in Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time'. This data shows that participants place high value on the additional support provided by the NCSE's frontline services to schools, pupils and families. The subtheme 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support' captures diverse opinions on available resources, their potentials and their limitations within the system. The subtheme 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment' explores participants' experiences with the ease or difficulty of making support applications and its impact on their perception of service quality and effectiveness.

More generally, this theme is relevant to the following RQs:

- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

The findings from the online survey highlight varying perceptions among school staff regarding the value of NCSE support. While a majority (60 per cent) view it as 'valuable', some respondents (27 per cent) consider it 'very valuable'. However, 37 per cent express dissatisfaction, often due to insufficient support. Services such as the VTS and TPL, and collaboration with the NCSE in research or consultation, receive positive feedback, but the allocation and review of staffing support are seen as the least valuable elements. Some respondents commend the VTS in free-text comments. There is also general agreement on the relevance of NCSE frontline services, although a significant minority (35 per cent) disagrees.

The survey also reveals mixed opinions about the TPL portfolio. While most participants find TPL valuable, a significant portion (43 per cent) feels it does not effectively meet their training needs, often citing funding challenges or a mismatch with their specific requirements. Free-text comments raise concerns about the expertise of TPL deliverers. During in-depth interviews, one participant (themselves autistic) was concerned that autism training was deficit loaded, meaning that it focussed on what was 'wrong' with children with ASD. The case studies reflect appreciation for the additional support provided by the NCSE, particularly through TPL, SENOs and published guides. All students in the case studies communicated a strong sense of belonging in their schools, facilitated by key staff, especially SNAs.

Despite positive aspects, many participants across the dataset express concerns about system insufficiencies, such as difficulties in recruiting specialist staff to the NCSE, limited places in TPL programmes, and complex, time-consuming application processes for additional resources. In the survey of school staff, while some find the NCSE easy to work with (38 per cent), a majority (59 per cent) describe it as 'not easy', citing issues with transparency and the cumbersome nature of certain processes, particularly exceptional reviews. Good relationships with NCSE staff are noted to help mitigate the negative impact of these challenges.

The findings indicate that participants place high value on NCSE frontline services when they are sufficient and of consistently of high quality. In their view, these services are crucial for ensuring that students with SEN receive 'The right support in the right place at the right time'. However, the data clearly signal areas for improvement, including:

- matching the TPL portfolio to need and demand
- reducing the bureaucratic burden of applications for additional resources, particularly in the case of exceptional reviews.

Reductions in bureaucracy are likely to impact positively on stakeholders' perceptions of the NCSE and the quality and impact of its frontline services. When this is combined with more face-to-face interaction and responsive communication, improved perceptions are likely.

8. Findings – Theme 4: Collaboration and (mis) understanding

This section reports the findings for Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding' and contains accounts of how participants perceive 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration' (subtheme) to be a resource that improves (or can improve) both satisfaction and impact. The subtheme 'Knowledge of the NCSE and public relations' contains data showing that many participants had limited knowledge of the NCSE and its remit. Participants across the data sets propose public relations work as a priority for the NCSE at this time in its history. Relevant RQs are:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Quantitative data from the survey of parents/carers and school staff. Descriptive statistics from the survey are presented in tables and graphs to provide a clear and concise overview of the results and are accompanied by summaries and interpretations. Where relevant, respondents' free-text entries are quoted to illustrate recurrent topics and perspectives. Direct quotations are labelled to indicate whether a parent/carer, a school leader (principal/deputy principal) or a teacher (class teacher, SET teacher) provided the text. When referring to free text from surveys, it is ensured that these responses reflect the perspectives of various respondents. This evaluation prevents reporting multiple free-text contributions from the same individual to ensure a wide representation of views, while identifying common patterns in those views.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and case studies is presented in a narrative format supported by excerpts from interviews, conversations and student maps. To support this narrative approach, vignettes from the case-study data are also presented as illustrations of how themes were active in the context of a student's school experience.

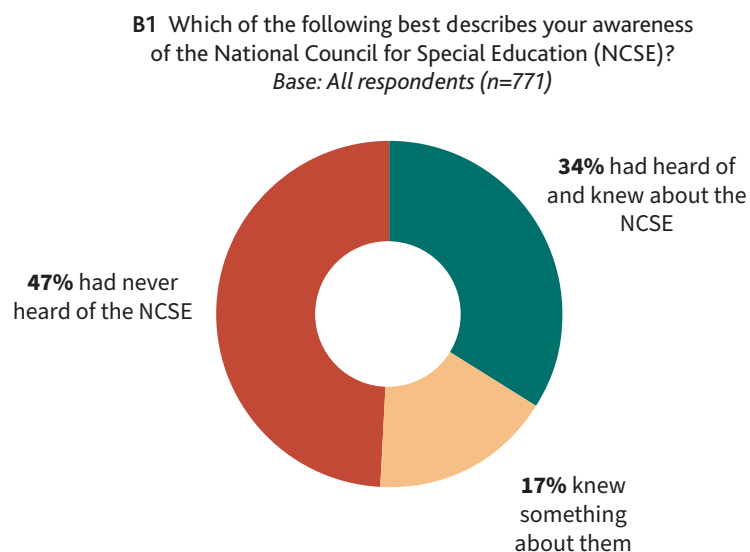
While the data content for this theme was relatively small, the theme was significant enough to warrant reduction in the thematic framework.

Subtheme: 'Knowledge of the NCSE and the need for public relations'

This subtheme contains data related to participants' knowledge of the NCSE and its role. It begins with reporting on the findings in the survey data.

Subtheme: 'Knowledge of the NCSE and the need for public relations: online survey of parents/carers'

Around a third (34 per cent) of parents/carers reported that they had heard of the NCSE and knew something about it (Figure 8.1). A further 17 per cent had heard of them but had no detailed knowledge of what it did. Just under half (47 per cent) had not heard of the NCSE at all.

Figure 8.1: Awareness of NCSE

Free-text responses to the survey demonstrated that awareness among parents/carers was relatively low, with recommendations that there could better communication about what the NCSE does and how it could support parents:

There needs to be an advertising campaign to highlight your service to parents. Accessing vital needs as an SNA is a fight and when parents are fighting daily for services to support their child this shouldn't be another one. (Parent/carer)

Subtheme: 'Knowledge of the NCSE and the need for public relations in the qualitative data'

During in-depth interviews with parents/carers, a few participants described the activism they had initiated to protest what they perceived to be unfair or insufficient allocations of support to a school or a child. In one case, this had involved a protest to politicians following an unsuccessful appeal against the decision of an exceptional review. In another, it had involved a parent/carer calling the SENO to protest against what was being asked for in an application, given that, in the parent/carers' view, the child's needs were already confirmed by a Health Service Executive (HSE) diagnostic assessment.

Half the school staff interviewed perceived a need for the NCSE to invest more time in public relations so that its reputation could be improved. Participants believed that this is important in the current and future context, and the following is typical of the argument presented:

The experience of a lot of parents would be that he or she who shouts loudest gets the most. So, our system is probably training parents to be like that, but I think if you can clearly and confidently and calmly communicate to parents what's happening, even if it's something that's maybe not 100 per cent what they would like or what they want to hear. At least they're not dealing with kind of a vacuum. (School principal 6, post-primary mainstream with special class(es), positive sentiment).

In the quotation above, this principal highlights the importance of the NCSE prioritising public relations to build trust with parents and staff. They note that the current system often rewards the most vocal parents, creating an environment in which parents feel compelled to be assertive to get support. The principal believes that clear, confident and calm communication from the NCSE can alleviate this issue, even if the information shared is not entirely what parents want to hear. Providing consistent and transparent updates helps to prevent feelings of being ignored or misled, reducing suspicion and fostering better relationships. The principal goes on to explain that this approach is equally important for staff, who also need to understand the perspectives of principals and the NCSE to maintain trust and collaboration. Transparency and open lines of communication were seen by many participants as an important solution to work on.

In school case studies, it was observed that while schools were familiar with the role and remit of the NCSE, the level of knowledge schools had was directly related to each school's specific context and the resources it required to meet a student's needs at a particular time. Not all schools had the same level of knowledge, and within schools, differences in relation to familiarity with the NCSE were evident between staff members:

We're not aware that anyone has requested a service from the NCSE to come into the school. (Teacher focus group, primary school)

We do different courses here in the school. I'm not sure about the NCSE. I'm not sure who they are all run by. (SNA, special school)

Here is home away from home for our children and that is the model that we work and SNAs are vital to that. A lot of our children would not be able to access their programmes without the support of the SNAs. I wish there were another avenue for other human resources that you could look for, for academic support. (Principal, special school)

The level of knowledge was perceived to vary across school contexts. This was particularly evident in relation to participants' knowledge of the role of the NCSE in providing TPL. As with the survey data, parents'/carers' knowledge of the role and remit of the NCSE was inconsistent, with parents' familiarity being broadly related to securing SNA support and technology, where relevant:

I am not aware of the school receiving professional development from the services provided the NCSE. I'm not aware of it. I don't know [if] it's happening or not. There was a laptop during COVID and that would have been through the NCSE. (Parent/carer)

An exception identifiable in this subtheme was the knowledge among parents/carers and school staff of the role and remit of the VTS, which participants acknowledged in terms of its value in supporting children, schools and families. This was reported previously by the parent/carer who noted that 'The visiting teacher is just so important. As a new mum with a child with a disability, that support was invaluable.'

During the collection of case-study data, and in discussions with TRs, it was noted that where participants were not aware of particular NCSE services, they expressed a readiness to explore these frontline services further in the future, as observed by a primary school principal: 'We really haven't used the resources that are available to us from the NCSE.' This suggests that an information campaign targeting schools and parents/carers would potentially increase participants' engagement with the frontline services being provided by the NCSE and hence raise awareness of what was on offer.

It was suggested that the lack of visibility of the NCSE in schools impacted on teachers' relationships with the NCSE and their awareness of its role and services. One teacher felt that the 'relationship [was] non-existent'. Another SET had been in the role for over a year and did not feel that they had a relationship or received any 'visible support' from the NCSE. Where NCSE frontline services had a presence in schools, participants were positive about the relationship that developed between the school staff and NCSE staff, although some participants would have liked more engagement:

Piecemeal, it is one little bit and then they are gone, there is no follow-up. (Principal, special school)

This reinforces the findings already reported on the importance of personalised communication, face-to-face contact and relationship-building.

Subtheme: 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration'

This subtheme represents participants' perspectives on mutual responsibilities and the degree of trust that the staff providing NCSE frontline services have in school staff and vice versa.

Subtheme: 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration in the qualitative data'

Across the case studies, participants' relationship with the NCSE seemed to be impacted by a lack of clarity around which agency is responsible for certain services; uncertainty around who to contact within the NCSE with specific queries; lack of awareness of the frontline services available; and significant delays between requests for support/resources and receiving a response from the NCSE. There was a sense that school staff sometimes felt that the NCSE did not trust their professional judgement. One teacher spoke of feeling that they were not being 'believed' when applying of resources.

If the school is saying that additional supports are required, then there shouldn't be excessive scrutiny on that. (Teacher, post-primary mainstream, S8).

One principal participating in the case studies described an 'abdication of responsibility', whereby it was felt that the school passed an issue to the SENO who then passed the issue onto a colleague, which led to decision-making becoming more distal from the student's school context. Participants were positive in terms of SENOs, advisors and VTs spending time in schools throughout the year. The VTS, for example, was acknowledged as 'quite good' for maintaining communication as they 'drop in, drop out' of the school and communicate via telephone and email (Principal). Participants also noted the impact that the transition to online application systems has had on their relationship with the NCSE. This is perceived as having reduced human interaction, with one principal describing the NCSE as:

... kind of an entity there online. It would be nice if the NCSE were more concrete and visible. (Principal, mainstream primary, S6)

SNAs participating in the case studies felt distanced from the NCSE, with one commenting that she would not have a relationship with the NCSE as it does not 'filter down to the SNAs much'. The case studies also illustrate that parents/carers and school staff regularly engage with many other agencies in addition to the NCSE to support students' (that is, NEPS, TUSLA, HSE Primary Care, Disability Services). This is seen as sometimes perpetuating a lack of clarity around who, in fact, is responsible for a specific service (such as psychological assessments). Collaborating with multiple agencies to support students was acknowledged as complex, with one participant describing services as 'fragmented' (Principal). In one example, a principal articulated the challenge of supporting students, when some agencies liaise only with parents/carers and others liaise primarily with schools. Poor collaboration between services was perceived as creating gaps in information-sharing and hence inefficiencies.

Echoing the phenomenon identified in the wider data, infused through participants' perceptions in the case-study data was a sense that there was scope to develop collaboration and a shared understanding between parents/carers, schools and the NCSE, based on the principles of mutuality, trust and collaboration. Where parents/carers and schools reported positive experiences with the NCSE, these principles were clearly discernible:

We would have had a meeting with the SENO. We would have had a student where the application for SNA hours was rejected and rejected again. And we kind of kept pushing it. On the advice of the SENO, then we had a Meitheal meeting to further bolster our case, and it was eventually granted. Certainly, we would get advice from the NCSE. (SEN coordinator and class teacher, post-primary, mainstream school)

The challenges being experienced by schools and parents/carers in relation to securing assessments and being provided with therapeutic support were repeatedly referred to by participants, who reported ongoing difficulties in accessing services. It should be noted that it is not the NCSE that carries out assessments but the HSE, and that currently, in-school therapeutic support is only provided by the NCSE in one area. This means that where participants comment on therapeutic services (such as those provided by Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) and organised by the HSE), they are referring to services not delivered by the NCSE. However, the resource shortage in HSE was recognised by some participants as connected with the challenges encountered by schools in support of SEN.

Participants perceived the absence of a wrap-around service to be particularly frustrating and having a negative effect on children and families. They also noted an absence of cooperation between the various services, whose combined role related to supporting children and families:

I don't know does the NCSE recognise that we can't get assessments for children or that we have problems with the CDNT, the Children's Disability Network Team. They're the biggest outside agency here. They were set up two years ago or whatever it was, and we had a big problem here....Does the NCSE and other services realise each other is there? (Principal, primary mainstream school)

This principal went on to describe a severe shortage of clinical psychologists and speech and language therapists in her region, calling it a 'black hole' due to the lack of available services. The situation was exacerbated by COVID-19, leading to prolonged waiting lists for children needing support. The principal questioned whether the NCSE and other services were aware of each other's roles and limitations and the way in which these factors might interact, implying a need for better coordination and awareness among service providers to effectively address the gaps. This closely relates to the subtheme '*Bureaucracy as a Mediator of Sentiment*', in which participants felt that obtaining support from the NCSE was hindered by excessive bureaucratic processes. As a result, mutuality, trust, and collaboration were ultimately compromised:

At the moment here there's no SENO. The main thing in my role is getting SNA hours, that's the main thing in my role as a deputy principal that I have to do. That's such a complicated process and so last year we had applied under the new system online. We kind of got refused twice. When we asked for clarification, we didn't get clarification. When we asked for guidance, we didn't get it. (Teacher, primary mainstream school)

The primary school teacher expressed frustration with the NCSE's processes, describing them as difficult and unresponsive. The teacher noted challenges in obtaining basic resources and mentioned that the absence of a SENO exacerbated the problem. Specifically, securing SNA hours is a complicated task, and despite applying through the new online system, their requests were refused twice without clear explanations or guidance. This reflects a broader issue of inefficiency and lack of support in navigating the system.

The general sense of frustration conveyed by school staff and parents/carers during the collection of case-study data stemmed from the process of requesting additional staffing and support from the NCSE, particularly the sanctioning of exceptional teaching posts and SNA allocations. This frustration was also linked to the reduced availability of inter-professional support and assessments:

The NCSE is supposed to be there as an advocacy agency but sometimes it doesn't feel like we are on the same side. (Principal, special school)

The following vignette provides an illustration of the subtheme 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration' as applied to a 12-year-old student attending a mainstream school. In this case, neither the student nor their parent/carer felt listened to when seeking additional equipment.

Vignette Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding': CYP2, 12 years old

Introduction

CYP2 is 12 years old, in sixth class in a mainstream town mixed primary school with a DEIS designation. Thirty students with SEN are enrolled in the school. In second class, following a private psychological assessment, CYP2 was assessed with high-functioning ASD, dyslexia and self-regulation issues. Following this assessment, learning support was provided and a successful application for assistive technology was made.

Mutuality, trust and collaboration

CYP2 actively participates in the school. Their artwork is displayed throughout the classroom and school. They are on the school coding and football teams and are particularly proud of awards and competitions that these teams have won.

CYP2 is facilitated in eating lunch alone in the school corridor as they do not like 'eating with other people'. There is a sensory room which CYP2 only uses 'once in a blue moon'. As captured on the map and through conversation and a walking tour of the school, the important places for CYP2 are the corridor (eating space), the learning support room, the library (where coding takes place) and the Halla (events they enjoy such as playing football with peers, PE and the Christmas play take place here).

CYP2 was disappointed that they had to get privately assessed, as they were unable to get an assessment when requested by their parents, in first class. CYP2 was frustrated with the cap on the number of psychological assessments and felt that 'Everybody should have a chance. If parents think they are eligible they should get a diagnosis, but the school just refuses.' This CYP's parent felt that they had to fight hard for any resources their child received and that the support of an SNA would have helped with organisation skills. They spoke about the CYP bringing home a heavy bag of books, often the incorrect books, which sometimes resulted in homework not being done.

The CYP receives 30 minutes of daily learning support in literacy and mathematics, and the SET also facilitates a movement break each morning. CYP2 described feeling relaxed after the movement break in the stone yard, experiencing the sound created by walking on the stones as '*relaxing*'. CYP2 acknowledged that the SET helped a lot, teaching them 'how to do fractions, decimals and all that'. The SET had also taught them songs on the keyboard, which they enjoyed.

Following assessment, CYP2 received an iPad. CYP2 and their parent felt that the iPad was not appropriate, as they prefer to type their essays. CYP2's parent bought a laptop and software including MS Word and PowerPoint were reported to help with school tasks, as English and spelling were noted to be particularly challenging areas.

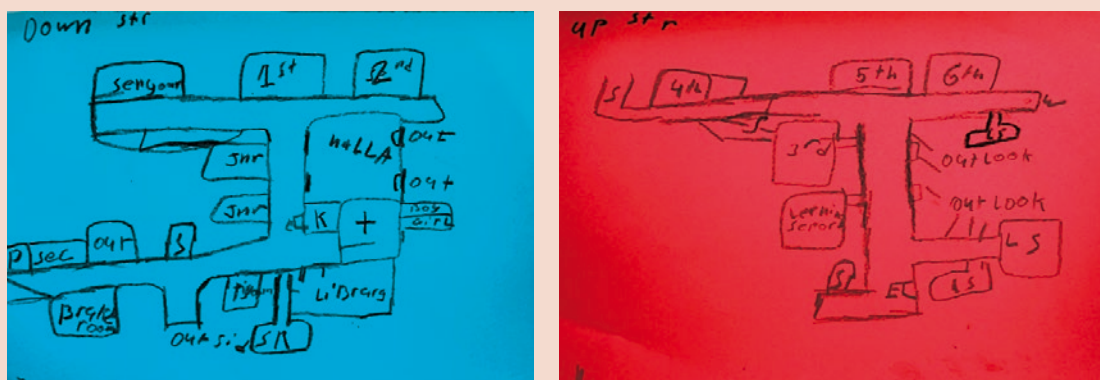


Figure 4. CYP2's maps of the downstairs and upstairs of their school and the places where they spend time

Conclusion

CYP2 meaningfully participates in the school community and acknowledges how the services provided support their learning and wellbeing. Highlighting the importance of communication and developing a shared understanding, both the CYP and their parent did not feel listened to when seeking additional resources.

During in-depth interviews, some NCSE staff highlighted the importance of trust and collaboration between NCSE service providers and the services users. For example, engaging with stakeholders in a reassuring way and helping them navigate the process was identified as good practice for building trust. This meant being seen as someone who knew the system and was there to help parents/carers and schools to navigate it effectively. An NCSE principal officer noted that the application process for SEN could seem overwhelming and intimidating, with both parents and schools often starting with doubts about receiving adequate support. The officer emphasised the importance of knowing what to ask for and how to ask it, stating, 'You have to know what to ask for and how to ask for it.' Building trust was viewed as essential, helping to address these doubts and provide reassurance. The officer shared their own experience as a SENO, explaining how they would meet with parents and staff at pre-school to have direct, personal conversations with anxious parents, saying, 'I would make a point of meeting them before they start pre-school' and 'You talk to them in the context of the pre-school.' This approach was aimed at better understanding the child's needs and ensuring a smoother transition to school, ultimately fostering clearer communication and support.

NCSE staff also commented on how service users were not always aware of the limits of their power in making decisions about allocations. They talked about the value of developing a system that was more cross-sectoral, cooperative and joined up. Some NCSE staff also reported on the impact of media and political interest in the agency and SEN, and how these might create a divisive rather than a collaborative climate in which service users' trust could be developed more productively. Two school staff also commented on the impact of negative media attention on their admissions policies for children with SEN, often being ill-informed about what was and was not possible, and what was and was not to blame.

Most school staff interviewed communicated a wish for more collaboration and trust between teachers, school principals and the NCSE. Distrust in a principal's judgements was perceived to be an ill fit with a system that was trying to work collaboratively to build inclusion for students with SEN. A school principal from a primary mainstream school described the challenging reality of securing SNA support for a child who urgently needed it. They expressed frustration that simply presenting the child's needs (such as being 'a flight risk' and posing a 'risk of harm to staff and other parents') often was not enough to justify the support. The principal felt that the system, including the NCSE, lacked trust in their professional judgment, stating, 'the whole system, NCSE included, lacks a trust in us as professionals'. They emphasised that requests for resources were driven by genuine concern for the child's wellbeing, not by a desire to make the school's workload easier. The principal criticised the cumbersome paperwork involved, mentioning, 'the weighty paperwork... makes it seem like that', and noting that 'you're not going to go through all that paper if you know nothing will come of it'. This situation highlighted a need for greater mutual trust and collaboration between schools and the NCSE, to ensure that resource allocation would effectively meet the genuine needs of students:

We're looking for resources because we think a child desperately needs that support, not because we're trying to make our life easier. And I think sometimes that weighty paperwork makes it seem like that. So, in order to possibly get turned down for that, you've gone through this process with files this big [gestures with hands] ... you know and we not trying to be cynical but you're not going to go through all that paper if you know nothing will come of it. (School principal 5, primary mainstream with special class(es), in-depth interview, mixed sentiment).

When asked about the cross-sectoral collaboration, school staff and parent/carers were unable to comment on it and had no awareness of how this worked, though some had noted that there seemed to be a lack of interaction between the NCSE and CDNTs. The fact that participants were unable to comment on collaboration across services indicates that there is some work to do in this area.

Summary

This section has reported the findings in Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'. It includes information on how participants view 'Mutuality, trust and collaboration' (subtheme) as elements that can enhance satisfaction and impact. Additionally, data in the subtheme 'Knowledge of the NCSE and public relations' suggests that participants had limited knowledge about the NCSE and its role. Some school staff suggested that the NCSE should implement a public relations programme to improve perceptions of its service quality, impact and knowledge of its remit. The term 'public relations' in this section refers to a strategic communication process aimed at cultivating positive relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders. The goal is to build a favourable public image through tools like media relations, social media, community engagement and events. The findings in this section are relevant to the following RQs:

- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

In the survey of parents/carers, it emerged that only 34 per cent had some awareness of the NCSE, while the majority (64 per cent) either had not heard of it or reported limited/no knowledge. Free-text comments further illustrated the prevalent low awareness of the NCSE, which may explain the low levels of engagement with the NCSE website. However, in this evaluation, parents/carers focused mainly on the services they had experienced and accessed. This means that although many may not have been aware of the NCSE as an organisation, they were familiar with the frontline service that was the focus of their participation. In-depth interviews with parents/carers revealed instances of activism against perceived injustices, including protests to politicians. Some school staff discussed negative media coverage of SEN, portraying it as a predominantly political issue.

Half the interviewed school staff felt that the NCSE should invest more time in public relations and communications to foster more positive and accurate perceptions of the organisation and its frontline services. In case studies, it was observed that knowledge of the NCSE was largely confined to the school context. School staff who had not interacted with NCSE staff delivering frontline services were unfamiliar with their roles. This phenomenon was also evident from in-depth interviews with school staff. Participants from case studies and in-depth interviews expressed the view that decreased visibility of NCSE staff in schools had contributed to low awareness, leading to misconceptions about the organisation's roles and effectiveness.

Furthermore, participants in case studies were unclear about the responsibilities of individual NCSE frontline services and how these services collaborated with other agencies, such as the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS). This lack of clarity led to a 'pillar-to-post' experience that participants found frustrating and confusing, prompting suggestions for clearer definitions of roles and mutual accountabilities as potential solutions. In in-depth interviews and case studies, some school leaders expressed concerns about a perceived lack of trust from the NCSE in their judgement. There was a shared desire for greater trust and collaboration across the system, envisioning a less adversarial environment where frontline services, schools and parents/carers could work in partnership. Importantly, none of the participants knew how NCSE frontline services collaborated with other services or agencies, highlighting a lack of visibility and concreteness in this area.

This combined evidence suggests that public relations and collaborative approaches are key areas that need to be addressed for improving the NCSE and its frontline services.

9. Summary and conclusion

This section provides a summary of the findings and offers conclusions on areas of strength and areas for improvement in the NCCE's frontline services. It begins with a reiteration of the context for this study and its methods.

Context

This independent evaluation was commissioned by the NCSE to investigate stakeholder perceptions of its frontline services. The UoD Consortium was appointed to deliver the commission. The consortium comprised the UoD, MIC and IFF Research Limited. These organisations have a track record of expertise in research-focused policy and practice for SEN and inclusive education.

The focus of the independent evaluation was the NCSE's frontline services. These are the services most visible to stakeholders in their day-to-day interactions with the agency. In this evaluation, the services of interest were:

- SENO
- VTS
- NCSE in-school advisory service
- SET and SNA allocations and exceptional reviews
- applications and allocations for transport, equipment and HT
- TPL
- NCSE website (including the School Portal)
- NCSE guides and resources for parents/carers and schools.

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this evaluation is not to compare one frontline service with another in terms of quality, value or impact. The focus of this evaluation is not on determining which services are performing better or worse, but rather on exploring service users' perceptions of NCSE frontline services as a cohesive package of support. Given that each service is tailored to meet distinct needs and operates within different contexts, direct comparisons would be misleading. Moreover, placing emphasis on comparison could detract from the broader aim of understanding how these services collectively contribute to overall outcomes for users. For these reasons, we ask readers not to interpret the findings comparatively.

RQs and research design

The four RQs posed for the study were as follows:

- RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'
- RQ2: 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
- RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'
- RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

These questions were investigated using mixed methods that included an online survey of 771 parents/carers and 558 school staff, in-depth interviews with 33 stakeholders, and in-depth case studies of nine varied schools and nine children with SEN within those schools. The research project was commissioned in September 2022. Collection of primary data took place between April and October 2023 and engaged almost 1,400 participants. Survey data was analysed using descriptive methods. Qualitative data from interviews and case studies was analysed thematically. The project was completed in January 2024.

Thematic structure

Four themes emerged from the data analysis, each containing at least two subthemes. Table 9.1 provides a summary of the thematic framework and highlights the research questions most relevant to each theme's data content.

Table 9.1: Thematic structure

Major theme	Subthemes	RQs
Impact as perceived by stakeholders	'Descriptions of impact' 'Process schema as dominant over impact schema'	RQ2: 'What is the impact of NCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'
Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment	'Crucial role of the SENO and school staff' 'Sustained personalised relationships and their value' 'The communication continuum from responsive to isolating'	RQ3: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?' RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

The right support in the right place at the right time	'The value of the additional supports enabled/delivered by NCCE's frontline services' 'Perceptions of sufficiency/insufficiency of capacity and support' 'Bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment'	RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?' RQ2: What is the impact of NSCSE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders? RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'
Collaboration and (mis)understanding	'Mutuality, trust and collaboration' 'Knowledge of the NCSE and public relations'	RQ1: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?' RQ4: 'What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?'

Throughout the report, the findings have been presented in the structure summarised in Table 9.1 and include thematically linked findings from the online survey of parents/carers and school staff. This was to ensure that evidence from the corpus data was meaningfully aggregated to answer the RQs and to identify phenomena of interest. RQ1 was also addressed through a review of context that has been presented in Section 2. In the summary that follows later in this section, key findings are reported for each RQ, with relevant evidence from each theme aggregated to support conclusions.

Limitations

Although the study engaged almost 1,400 (1,377) participants and was rigorously implemented to ensure trustworthiness, there are some limitations. Firstly, the survey was distributed to potential respondents via a link shared in a generic email. It was not possible to distribute links to known individuals in the target population. This means we have been unable to calculate response rates or to estimate how far the respondent profile represents the profile of the target population or its subgroups (for example type of special educational need, region, age phases). Furthermore, weighted means could not be calculated. However, in the case of the number of schools engaged in the study, the aggregated survey population represents about 15 per cent of the target population and can make some claim to representativeness.

The study also focuses on perceptions. These are of great value and their validity is not questioned here – rather, it is endorsed. However, the evaluation does not compare patterns of perception found in this study with objective measures of impact such as educational enrolment, attainment and progression. This is because these national measures are not available in Ireland apart from national examination data, and in the latter case outcomes are not disaggregated for SEN.

A summary of the key findings from across the corpus data are summarised under each RQ.

Summary of findings

This first subsection summarises the findings related to RQ1. It begins with the outcomes of the contextual analysis completed at the start of the study.

RQ1: Key Findings on the policy and practice landscape

RQ1 was: 'What is the policy and practice landscape within which the NCSE services operate?'

Data relevant to answering this RQ is found within Theme 3: 'The right support in the right place at the right time', and in the contextual review of the NCSE within its policy landscape. Since the 1990s, policy interest has shifted towards a unified approach to education, with integration and inclusion being central concerns. These shifts in Ireland have been influenced by international declarations such as the UNCRC, ratified by Ireland in 1992, and the Salamanca Statement, which Ireland endorsed in 1994. Both international policies emphasise the right to education for all, including those with SEN, and the need to adopt principles of inclusive education across the system.

The NCSE was established in 2003 and formally adopted in the 2004 EPSEN Act. Its frontline services operate according to the remit laid out in the Act. While some provisions remain unimplemented, the broad intention of the Act is to ensure that all children with SEN receive appropriate education, according to their individual needs and abilities. This includes the supports and accommodations necessary to ensure they can access and benefit from educational provision. The Act specifies an inclusive (mainstream) environment as the intended setting for the education of children with SEN (Section 2). More broadly, the NCSE's role is to ensure that all children with SEN receive appropriate educational support to promote their development and wellbeing. The NCSE is responsible for coordinating and delivering educational services tailored to these children's specific needs, promoting an inclusive approach to education.

The NCSE operates across the continuum of education, which includes a range of educational settings and supports, from mainstream schools to special schools and classes. This continuum aims to provide tailored interventions and support for students with varying degrees of SEN, ensuring that each child has access to the most suitable educational environment to help them achieve their potential.

Under the remit of the EPSEN Act, the NCSE was formed as an independent government agency responsible for overseeing and coordinating resources and services for students with SEN within DE policy. The NCSE's frontline services are its core function and the primary medium through which it delivers its remit to families and school communities.

There has been sustained and significant growth in demand for SEN services in Ireland over the past decade. For instance, there has been an 81 per cent increase in SNA numbers and a 556 per cent increase in special classes. Currently, 27 per cent of the total Exchequer fund for education

is allocated to SEN. This reflects the importance of SEN in Ireland's policy landscape but also illustrates a significant increase in the NCSE's operational workload. This increase has occurred without proportional workforce growth, though this is now being addressed. The total estimated NCSE staffing has increased from 230.5 in 2022 to an estimated 426 in 2024, reflecting a substantial expansion in the workforce to support special education needs. It is important to note that this evaluation took place before the expansion, so stakeholder experiences are likely explained, at least in part, by a workforce that has been increasingly stretched over recent years.

Alongside its staffing expansion, the NCSE has been implementing *Vision 2026*, a transformative project focusing on workforce development. This project seeks to effectively utilise the increased funding provided by the Government of Ireland to enhance the NCSE's workforce and better respond to service demands. These developments show that the NCSE is operating in an evolving policy and practice context. This dynamic space requires the NCSE to continually develop through consultation, collaboration and openness to public scrutiny. This evaluation provides a rich account of the perceptions of the NCSE's key beneficiaries in terms of the quality and impact of its frontline services, and it is designed to inform the continued implementation of *Vision 26*.

In relation to service-user perspectives and the findings from primary data, key findings for RQ1 are summarised under the following topic areas:

- positive perceptions of NCSE support but with some limitations
- the NCSE's important role in enhancing student inclusion and wellbeing
- challenges in resource availability, capacity and training
- complex and onerous application processes (bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment)
- positive relationships with NCSE frontline staff to help alleviate process challenge
- parental awareness of the NCSE and its remit.

These are described in more detail below.

Positive perceptions of NCSE support but with some limitations

While school staff and parents/carers generally value the support provided by NCSE frontline services, there are concerns about the sufficiency and effectiveness of the support in some areas:

- School staff and parents/carers place high value on the support and resources that they have received through NCSE frontline services. In the online survey, most school staff (60 per cent) perceived NCSE support as valuable overall, with some (27 per cent) describing it as very valuable and others (37 per cent) as not valuable. However, most school staff (83 per cent) described the VTS as valuable. TPL (79 per cent) and working with the NCSE in research or consultation (76 per cent) were also identified as valuable assets. The majority found the NCSE advisory service (65%) and applications for additional equipment (65%) to be valuable.

- For school staff, this was also true for the support that NCSE frontline services provided for parents/carers and the implementation of SNA and SET support in school (61 per cent). The service that school staff perceived less positively in terms of value was the allocation and review of staffing support. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer survey, many respondents praised the VTS.
- Similarly, most school staff perceived the advice and support provided by NCSE frontline services to be relevant, with 19 per cent describing it as 'very relevant' and 41 per cent as 'fairly relevant', though 35 per cent responded more negatively, with a minority (8 per cent) describing the advice and support as 'not at all relevant'.
- In the online survey, around half the school staff identified the NCSE website as 'valuable' (48 per cent).
- In terms of satisfaction with the support and services offered by NCSE, only 8 per cent were 'very satisfied' and 30 per cent were 'fairly satisfied', whereas 32 per cent were 'not very satisfied' and 29 per cent were 'not at all satisfied'.
- Where service users were less positive, it was often because they perceived that they did not receive enough support, or at least enough support to make a difference.

Challenges in resource availability, capacity and TPL

The findings highlight service users' perceptions of issues with resource shortages, capacity limitations and the adequacy of training programmes. While many participants valued NCSE's TPL services, the need to personalise and contextualise training programmes to actual need was raised as an area to focus on in the future, as follows:

- Excluding SET allocations, most participants perceived insufficiencies in the resources and capacity of the system to provide the level of support needed by students, families and school communities. For example, parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff were aware of the challenges of maintaining enough specialist staff, therapists, SNAs and SENOs, and they knew that this was a challenge across sectors, including the HSE, and that the teacher recruitment crisis was adding further challenges.
- During in-depth interviews and the case studies, school staff noted insufficiencies in places available on TPL programmes and in resources available to support staff release. Additionally, the survey revealed mixed opinions about the TPL portfolio. While most participants found TPL valuable, a significant portion (43 per cent) perceived that it did not meet their training needs effectively, often citing funding challenges or a mismatch with their specific requirements. Free-text comments expressed concerns about the expertise of TPL deliverers. The case studies highlighted the appreciation for additional supports provided by the NCSE, particularly through TPL, SENOs and published guides.

Complex, onerous and energy sapping application processes (bureaucracy as a mediator of sentiment)

The findings demonstrated that the application processes for additional resources are often seen as overly complicated and opaque, leading to frustration among parents and school staff. Delays and repeated steps in the application process contribute to negative perceptions of the NCSE's efficiency, as does slow decision-making in, for example, setting up special classes:

- Across the data set, participants reported that processes of application for additional resources were complex and onerous. Some participants also described them as opaque.
- Some parent/carers explained that it had taken much time to find a school that would meet their child's needs while also having sufficient places available to admit them.
- In the survey's free-text responses, parents/carers described long delays during the application process, with repeated, complex steps that frustrated them.
- As an indication of this more broadly, while some school staff perceived the NCSE as being easy to work with (38 per cent, survey), a majority (59 per cent) described it as not easy, emphasising issues with transparency and the cumbersome nature of certain processes, particularly exceptional reviews. The evaluation found that participants' experience of bureaucracy mediated their positive or negative sentiments towards the NCSE and its frontline services.

Positive relationships with NCSE frontline staff help to alleviate process challenges

Good relationships with NCSE staff are noted to mitigate the negative impact of these challenges, and bureaucracy mediates participants' sentiments towards the NCSE and its services, including the degree to which service users trust the decision-making process in the service (for example exceptional reviews), feel adequately supported or believe that service staff are committed to serve them well. Where participants had good relationships with NCSE staff, they were more resilient to these effects and were less negative about the pressures created by application processes.

Each of these topics aligns with different aspects of the policy and practice landscape in which the NCSE frontline services operate, from perceptions of their value to the practical challenges faced by those relying on their services.

Parental awareness of the NCSE and its remit

Generally, parent/carers had little broad awareness of the NCSE. This issue also arose in the findings related to RQ3: Many parents/carers had low awareness of NCSE as an organisation (47 per cent had not heard of it at all).

RQ1: Conclusion

The findings indicate that the landscape for NCSE frontline services has been changing. The significant rise in demand for SEN services can be interpreted as an indication of policy success and implementation; however, the causes and consequences of this increase in demand are widely debated. For the NCSE, this surge has resulted in increasing pressure on its frontline services. The increases in funding provided by the Government of Ireland in Budget 23, along with the workforce transformation project *Vision 2026*, are observed as responses to this context.

Stakeholders who participated in this evaluation would likely welcome increases in NCSE staffing and additional funding for SEN services. While participants perceived both sufficiencies and insufficiencies in resources, they focused more on their experiences of insufficiencies within the system (apart from SETs). Participants were aware of the NCSE's limited workforce capacity, echoing the NCSE's own request for increased funding. This view of insufficiency centred primarily on the exceptional review process, particularly regarding the allocation of additional SNAs, but it touched upon all services, including SENOs, NCSE advisors and TPL (again with the exception of SETs).

Participants expressed particular concern about the bureaucracy in the system and the negative impact it was having on their wellbeing and workloads. They frequently described how this bureaucracy affected the timeliness and efficiency of service delivery, especially in urgent situations.

Despite these challenges, the services and supports provided by the NCSE at the frontline are valued and often highly regarded by service users. A majority consider NCSE services relevant to their needs. Considering policy intentions, this can be interpreted as affirmation of the alignment between service design and user needs, highlighting how crucial this range of services is to service users. From the participants' perspective, these are the right services delivered in the right form. However, many participants feel there are not enough of these services and that bureaucracy is obstructing their timeliness and effectiveness,

It is also important to note that parent/carer awareness of the organisation in general was low, suggesting that their sentiments regarding the NCSE (and its frontline services) emerged primarily from their interactions with frontline staff.

RQ2: Key Findings on the impact of the NCCE's frontline services

RQ2 was: 'What is the impact of NSCE frontline services on pupils, parents/carers and school staff from the perspective of multiple stakeholders?'

Data relevant to answering this RQ is contained in Theme 1: 'Impact as perceived as stakeholders'. Key findings are reported under the following topic areas:

- mixed parental perceptions of NCSE support and its benefits
- significant benefits to access and education through NCSE services
- positive impact on students' social inclusion and wellbeing and family wellbeing
- positive but limited impact from perspective of school staff
- process dominates discussions on NCSE services.

Mixed parental perceptions of NCSE support and its benefits

Parental views on the impact of NCSE services were mixed. Overall, a small majority of parents/carers (51 per cent) perceived that NCSE frontline services had provided significant benefit to their children, though as noted under RQ1, many had low awareness of NCSE as an organisation (47 per cent had not heard of it). A notable percentage of parents/carers (35 per cent) reported only minimal or negative impacts from NCSE interventions.

Significant benefits to access and education through NCSE services

NCSE services like the VTS and SENO support were viewed as critical in improving access to education for many children:

- Most parents/carers reported that NCSE services led to improved access to education for their children, especially the VTS (81 per cent), SENO support in school placement (65 per cent), HT (62 per cent) and school transport (58 per cent). Free-text comments highlighted the importance of these services in ensuring access to schooling.

Positive impact on students' social inclusion and wellbeing, and family wellbeing

Parents/carers linked NCSE services to improvements in social inclusion and wellbeing, especially through SENO and VTS support:

- Parents/carers identified the VTS, SENO support and the allocation of SNAs as services that contributed to social benefits and inclusion. In contrast, few (7 per cent) saw HT as supporting inclusion, possibly because it occurs outside peer and community environments.

- In terms of improved wellbeing, the majority of parents/carers cited SENO support (53 per cent), VTS (46 per cent) and HT (41 per cent) as impactful. Free-text comments indicate that once appropriate support was in place, it greatly improved the wellbeing of children and their families.
- Some parents/carers reported that NCSE services improved their understanding of their child's needs and contributed to a better family life. Additionally, 21 per cent saw wellbeing benefits for other children in the family due to reduced stress levels at home.
- In case studies, parents/carers and students acknowledged the positive impact of additional staffing on student participation, learning, inclusion and wellbeing. Students, for example, noted how SETs helped their learning. Successful transitions and increased opportunities for socialisation were also attributed to NCSE services.
- Case studies revealed that school staff saw positive impacts on inclusion, wellbeing and confidence when they received support from the SENO, VTS and NCSE advisory services. Specific professional learning opportunities, such as those related to ASD, behaviour and bullying, were also praised when aligned with school needs.
- Understandably, students who participated in the case study did not comment directly on the value they placed on NCSE services, but all nine communicated a sense of belonging. Students explained how key staff, particularly SNAs, supported their inclusion, wellbeing and participation.
- The most consistent impact reported was the securing of additional supports that helped students to access education and improve their wellbeing.

Positive but limited impact from perspective of school staff

School staff had a more limited view of the impact of NCSE services, with few perceiving significant benefits to students:

- Only 38 per cent perceived significant benefits to children, while over 70 per cent felt there was little to no impact on other children in the school or parents/carers. However, some staff did perceive benefits to their schools' knowledge, confidence, methods and inclusive practices. The team's wider findings indicate that these perceptions are likely to arise from an awareness among school staff of insufficiency of staff capacity, bureaucracy and inconsistent communication, as described in the findings for RQ1.
- It also emerged that school staff conceptualised impact differently from parents/carers, regarding *impact* as a near synonym to *resource receipt*.

Process dominates discussions on NCSE services

Discussions about NCSE services tended to focus on process issues rather than their direct impact on students and families:

- Interviews with NCSE and school staff showed that participants focused more on operational processes (for example applications, operational interactions) than the impact on students and families. When asked to provide examples of positive impacts, participants struggled to articulate these clearly.
- It is not clear why this is the case, but explanations include the emotional resonance of onerous applications/refusals, the challenges of capacity shortages, and the assumption that inclusive outcomes will follow almost by default once the resource itself is allocated.
- Noting the schematic dominance of process is a phenomenon of interest rather than a criticism of participants.

RQ2: Conclusion

Overall, the data shows that perceptions among parents and carers regarding the impact of different frontline services varied. A majority acknowledged positive impacts on educational access, social benefits, inclusion and wellbeing for their children. A majority of participants also viewed the impact of SENOs positively in this regard. Among participants, NCSE frontline services were considered crucial for these impacts.

While school staff generally reported fewer positive perceptions of the NCSE frontline services compared to parents and carers, key findings revealed nuanced impacts. The survey highlighted varying views: some respondents acknowledged benefits such as improved knowledge among staff (40 per cent), increased school confidence (34 per cent), enhanced methods and processes (36 per cent), and inclusive practices (32 per cent), although none of these represented a majority of respondents. Notably, over 70 per cent perceived little, no or a detrimental impact on other children and parents and carers. In contrast, case studies provided positive accounts, particularly regarding successful applications for additional staffing through SENO support, which led to improved inclusion and wellbeing. Most importantly, all nine students who participated in the participative research expressed feelings of belonging, participation and progress in their schools. Although we cannot assume that these positive experiences are universal, the case studies provide insight into what can happen for students when the interaction of school practices and NCSE support functions effectively.

In interviews with school staff and NCSE staff, the focus on process schema often overshadowed impact schema. This is not a criticism of these participants, as there are various reasons for this trend (for example, the responsibility for creating impacts lies with the school rather than the service, or the emotional weight of challenging processes may take precedence). Rather, this is highlighted as a phenomenon of interest because there are potential benefits to constructing a collaborative discourse on impact along the continuum of support provided through the interaction of NCSE frontline services, schools and wider agencies. Shifting the understanding of impact from merely receiving the applied-for resources to perceiving it as improved inclusion

arising from multiple, interlocking supports (including universal design for learning) may foster a more holistic conceptualisation of what facilitates positive outcomes and identifies those desirable impacts.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that positive evaluations of the quality and impact of a frontline service were observed to arise when participants received the requested resources in a timely manner. This relationship between sentiment and allocation is important to acknowledge, but it may prove challenging to address. Nonetheless, the issue of public relations (discussed later) is relevant in this context.

RQ3: Key Findings on relationships, communication and collaboration

RQ3 was: 'What perceptions do multiple stakeholders have of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services?'

Data relevant to answering this RQ is contained in Theme 2: 'Communication and relationships as mediators of sentiment', and Theme 4: 'Collaboration and (mis)understanding'. Key findings are reported under the following topic areas:

- the crucial role of SENOs in shaping perceptions and service users' experience.
- the importance of personalised relationships and sustained (and/or face-to-face) contact
- challenges in communication and visibility
- low awareness of and misconceptions about NCSE
- the need for better collaboration and system trust.

The crucial role of SENOs in shaping perceptions and service-users' experience

Parents, school staff and NCSE staff see SENOs as the key representatives of NCSE, with their effectiveness strongly influencing perceptions of the service and system:

- Parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff perceived the services provided by SENOs as crucial, as they were seen as the face of NCSE, their interactions influencing perceptions of the NCSE and the system.
- The availability, responsiveness and competence of SENOs were seen as critical for securing support. Participants wanted consistent quality across the service and for sufficient SENOs to be available to all schools.
- Some participants expressed concerns about the decreasing visibility of SENOs in schools, which affected their perception of NCSE, highlighting the need for more presence and engagement.

The importance of personalised relationships and sustained (and/or face-to-face) contact

Personal relationships and regular, personalised interactions between NCSE staff and service users build trust and lead to more positive perceptions of the NCSE:

- Participants valued personalised relationships that developed over time. The NCSE advisory service and VTS were seen positively due to their sustained, willing relationships with schools.
- Trusting and supportive relationships with NCSE staff helped service users to stay positive, even when facing challenges like complex applications or denials, showing that relationships and communication strongly impact sentiment towards the NCSE.
- Face-to-face encounters were highly valued, as they helped services be more tailored to schools' needs, fostering more positive perceptions of the NCSE.

Challenges in communication and visibility

Parents and school staff reported issues with communication and a lack of visibility of NCSE frontline services, which negatively impacted their perceptions of the organisation:

- Communication issues were commonly reported, with slow responses and less face-to-face contact leading to negative perceptions. Competent and responsive staff helped, but the inconsistency in communication frustrated service users.
- Parents/carers often felt isolated and unsupported due to poor communication, with many struggling to navigate the system. They wanted better communication with the NCSE, more transparency and a stronger partnership with schools.
- School staff also experienced communication difficulties, particularly when they worked with less-effective NCSE staff. This inconsistency impacted their sense of support and the perceived impact of NCSE services.

Low awareness and confusion about the NCSE and its services

Many stakeholders had limited knowledge of NCSE services, with reduced visibility leading to misconceptions and negative perceptions:

- As noted under RQ1, around 64 per cent of parents/carers had limited or no knowledge of the NCSE, with only 34 per cent reporting some awareness of it. Free-text comments indicated that evaluations of NCSE were based on experiences with specific services rather than a full understanding of the organisation.
- School staff reported a lack of familiarity with NCSE services unless they had experienced direct interactions with NCSE frontline staff. Decreased visibility of NCSE staff in schools contributed to misconceptions and negative perceptions.

- Participants were unclear about the responsibilities and roles of different NCSE services and how they collaborated with other agencies like NEPS. This confusion often led to frustration and a 'pillar-to-post' experience for parents/carers and school staff.
- Some participants suggested that the following solutions for the NCSE: first, to engage in a public relations and communication programme that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of NCSE frontline services and explains its scope and remit; second, to increase the visibility of NCSE frontline services in schools.

The need for better collaboration and system trust

Among participants in this study, there was a desire for greater collaboration and trust between NCSE, schools and parents, with participants expressing concerns about an adversarial system:

- Some school leaders expressed concern about the lack of trust from NCSE in their judgement and desired more collaboration. They imagined a less adversarial system with more partnership between frontline services, schools and parents.
- During in depth interviews, parents/carers and school staff could not comment on cross-sectoral collaboration, as they had not observed it and knew little about it.
- Participants were unaware of how NCSE services collaborate with other agencies, indicating that these relationships were not visible or concrete to them.

RQ3: Conclusions

The findings suggest that perceptions of relationships, communication and collaboration in the context of NCSE's frontline services vary among stakeholders. SENOs are perceived as crucial by parents, carers and school staff; and, as the face of the NCSE, they mediate perceptions of the organisation. From the perspective of participants, the availability, responsiveness and competence of SENOs significantly impact the success of garnering additional support and services users' resilience to resource refusal. Personalised relationships and sustained interactions with NCSE advisory staff and the VTS are highly regarded, positively influencing perceptions. The combined data illustrates how much priority service users place on positive relationships with NCSE staff, and how much value they place on their expertise.

However, a perceived decrease in the visibility of NCSE staff in schools has led to reduced positive perceptions and knowledge of the organisation's functions. Stakeholders emphasise the importance of trusting relationships and face-to-face encounters, while highlighting the need for improved communication and relationships within NCSE frontline services. Many parents and carers, as well as school staff, express feelings of isolation and frustration due to poor communication and limited awareness of the NCSE's role. Some of these experiences make troubling reading.

Some participants suggest that the solutions for the NCSE include the following: first, to engage in a public relations and communication programme that clarifies the roles and responsibilities of NCSE frontline services and explains its scope and remit; second, to increase the visibility of NCSE frontline services in schools.

RQ4: Key Findings and conclusions on what is working well and what needs to be improved

RQ4 was: What is working well to deliver impacts, and what improvements could be made?' For this question, we draw conclusions from all key findings reported above.

To answer this question, data was drawn from across all themes to identify strengths and areas for development in NCSEs frontline services, from the perspective of service users themselves.

What is working well?

From the perspective of participants, the frontline services provided by the NCSE are the right services (in terms of their shape and remit) and are valued. However, there are not enough of them (that is, there are insufficiencies in size and capacity) and the quality is not always consistent. School staff and parents/carers place high value on the support and resources they receive through NCSE's frontline services. In the online survey, most school staff (60 per cent) perceived NCSE support as valuable overall, with some (27 per cent) describing it as very valuable. However, it is important to note that others (37 per cent) viewed it as not valuable. Where respondents were less positive, it was often because they felt they did not receive enough support, or at least not enough to make a difference. Most school staff who had interacted with a specific frontline service described the VTS (83 per cent), TPL (79 per cent) and working with the NCSE in research or consultation (76 per cent) as valuable. A majority also perceived the NCSE advisory service (65 per cent) and applications for additional equipment (65 per cent) as valuable. For school staff, this was also true regarding the support that NCSE frontline services provided for parents/carers and the implementation of SNA and SET support in schools (61 per cent). The service identified as the least valuable by school staff was the allocation and review (appeals) of staffing support. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer surveys, the VTS was praised by many respondents and the SENO recognised as crucial to children's inclusion.

The SENO role is positively impactful when it is working well, and participants view these role holders as the face of the NCSE. Parents, carers, school staff and NCSE staff perceive the services provided by (SENOs) as crucial to the development of inclusion for students with SEN. The data illustrates how the SENO is viewed as the face of the NCSE in the public sphere. Their interactions with stakeholders were observed to mediate positive or negative perceptions of the service and, more generally, of the system. When the SENO is effective in building relationships and shows empathy and a desire to foster good relationships with families and schools, perceptions of the NCSE are positive, even in cases where support has not been allocated following an application. It was clear that some participants received outstanding support from their SENO, and there were indications of expertise in the SENO workforce that participants highly valued. However, participants wanted this quality to be consistent across the service and for sufficient SENOs to be available to support all schools.

A majority of parents/carers reported positive impacts on access to education, wellbeing and progress. Often, support from frontline staff brings reassurance and positive change to families. Parents/carers reported that NCSE frontline services led to improved access to education for their

child. For example, 81 per cent identified the VTS as impactful in this respect and 56 per cent perceived SENO support as relevant to access. Regarding improved wellbeing for their children, a majority of parents/carers reported that SENO support in reviewing and allocating SNA support had an impact (53 per cent).

Service users highly regard some services. The VTS, NCSE advisory service, SENO role, TPL, additional resources (such as technology), school transport, HT, website resources, NCSE guides and research were all identified in varied ways by different participants as valuable, relevant and impactful services. In free-text comments from the school staff and parent/carer survey, the VTS was praised by many respondents. This implies that participants perceive benefits from a range of NCSE services. When reporting significant benefits, a majority of parents/carers noted this was the case for the VTS (71 per cent), with relatively high ratings also for reviewing and allocating SNAs (48 per cent), school transport (69 per cent) and HT (55 per cent). This indicates the difference that NCSE frontline services can make for families when they are working well.

Some families and school communities have worked with NCSE staff who are highly skilled and effective, not just in terms of knowledge but also in relationship-building. This indicates a skill base within the NCSE workforce that positively impacts families and schools. However, stakeholders recognise that insufficiencies in capacity (such as staff shortages and high caseloads) affect access to this expertise and that there are variabilities in the competence of role holders. The VTS is particularly impactful and is the most highly valued of all services. Our findings suggest this is because their relationships with service users are individualised, contextualised and sustained.

Where relationships and communication work well, they positively influence perceptions of the value and impact of services. However, these positive experiences are not always consistent, and participants' experiences of communication vary widely. When they experience responsive communication, their sentiment towards the frontline service and the NCSE more generally is positive.

Data from our interviews with NCSE staff contains evidence of their commitment, awareness of areas for improvement and desire to enhance quality and impact. NCSE staff are open to reflection and wish to develop their services to be more impactful, fostering better cross-sectoral working and collaboration.

Most importantly, all the students engaged in this evaluation communicated positive experiences of inclusion and participation, explaining how good relationships, SNAs and additional equipment have been crucial to their positive experiences at school. In the case studies, it was observed how students benefit when the support provided by schools (such as through universal design for learning) interacts with support from the NCSE, ensuring that students with SEN are included. Understandably, although students who participated in the case studies did not comment directly on the value that they place on NCSE services, all nine communicated a sense of belonging. They explained how key staff, particularly SNAs, supported their inclusion, wellbeing and participation. In case studies, additional staffing and support (such as equipment and transport) was identified by parents/carers and students as positively impactful on their access to education,

participation, learning and wellbeing. However, data from the case studies provided insights on how interactions between families, schools and NCSE frontline services can be improved for greater impact on students.

What improvements could be made?

The evaluation has identified the following areas as potential focuses for continual improvement.

Increase the capacity of frontline services: there is a need to ensure sufficient and responsive support for families and school communities. This phenomenon was prevalent in the data, with all participant groups recognising that insufficiencies impacted effectiveness. Except for SET allocations, most participants perceived a lack of resources and capacity in the system to provide the necessary level of support for students, families and school communities. For example, parents/carers, school staff and NCSE staff were aware of the challenges in maintaining enough specialist staff and SENOs, recognising this challenge across sectors, including the HSE. They acknowledged that the teacher recruitment crisis further exacerbated these challenges. Insufficiencies in available places on TPL programmes and resources to support staff release were noted by school staff during in-depth interviews and case studies. Additionally, the survey revealed mixed opinions about the TPL portfolio. While most participants found TPL valuable, a significant portion (43 per cent) reported that it does not effectively meet their training needs, often citing funding challenges or a mismatch with their specific requirements. Free-text comments expressed concerns about the expertise of TPL providers. The case studies highlighted appreciation for additional supports provided by the NCSE, particularly through TPL, SENOs and published guides. In interviews with NCSE and school staff, as well as in the survey free-text comments, participants expressed awareness of resource constraints that impact the system's capacity to deliver timely responses to applications and inquiries. A majority of participants (68 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'the NCSE does not have enough resources to meet the demands of the current system'. They viewed this as a systemic issue, not one that the NCSE could solve in isolation. However, with the NCSE's transformation programme *Vision 26* and increased staffing enabled by rising government funding, there is an opportunity for these issues to be addressed, particularly if services are delivered responsively and build positive relationships with service users.

Ensure sufficient staff capacity for relationship-building: training in relationship-building and communication would improve service provision in the context of greater staff capacity. These 'soft' skills (including empathy, non-judgemental approaches, active listening) influence how service users perceive the quality and impact of a service. Some participants had experienced negative interactions with NCSE frontline services, feeling judged, dismissed, not listened to or sent 'from pillar to post'.

Improve communication and relationships: clear, consistent, responsive and effective communication is an area for improvement. When NCSE and school staff were asked about communication and relationships with stakeholders, they identified a need for better communication strategies across the system. In the survey of parents/carers, many respondents reported feelings of isolation and being left in the dark due to poor communication. For instance,

parents/carers felt they had to navigate the system of support for SEN on their own because their claims about their child's needs were dismissed or their communications with the NCSE went unanswered. The findings illustrated the critical role of the SENO and the importance of sensitive and supportive communication between SENOs and families. Parents/carers desired better communication with the NCSE and more transparency.

Across the data, relationships and communication emerged as critical to service-user perceptions of the NCSE. When relationships with NCSE staff delivering frontline services were trusting and mutually supportive, service users had positive sentiments towards the service and the organisation. They were also more resilient to the effects of cumbersome application processes and having an application refused. This indicates that communication and relationships mediate sentiments about the NCSE, and where there are responsive, positive interactions with frontline staff, this impacts service users' overall perceptions.

Develop an impact-focused culture: the complex processes that enable the distribution of support for SEN explains why NCSE and school staff were more focused on operational matters than impact. It will be important to shift discussion and discourse in the direction of impact so that a shared and systemic focus on inclusive outcomes for students is more centralised. This could catalyse a culture of collaboration between the NCSE, its frontline services, wider services (such as the NEPS and Children Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), schools and parents/carers.

Review the TPL portfolio: some participants suggested the TPL portfolio needs to be reviewed to ensure it is age specific, meets the training needs of schools, includes more bespoke programmes and is accessible to schools that may not be able to release staff for learning events. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with TPL training and a desire for training options to be diversified. In the participants' view, the professional development that was most effective was that which took place in school and related to specific children and contexts.

Streamline processes for service users: some participants expressed a desire for NCSE processes to be streamlined for better access to supports and timely decisions on applications. Feedback indicated that processes for accessing services can be complex and cumbersome. Additionally, clarity is needed about what resources exist, what services are available, and how they can be accessed. The evaluation has found that bureaucracy mediates sentiment and that bad experiences of process can impact on participants' view of the NCSE more generally.

Focus on public relations and awareness raising: awareness-raising initiatives regarding the NCSE's role and services could enhance the quality and impact of frontline services. While some participants reported that they knew how to access services, many others felt unsure. The case studies revealed instances where school staff were unaware of specific NCSE services that could have benefited their students. Given that awareness and understanding of the NCSE as an organisation is relatively low, particularly among parents/carers, and that there is confusion among school staff about the remit and reach of specific services, awareness-raising seems an important task.

Overall conclusion

To conclude, this independent evaluation finds that the NCSE's frontline services are highly valued by service users, with examples of positive impacts and positive experiences across all types of service. The team believes that NCSE frontline services, as currently conceived, are well aligned with the needs of service users and Ireland's progress towards establishing a world-class, inclusive education system. However, this is only true when these services are functioning effectively, being personalised, responsive and adequately resourced. SENOs are recognised as the face of the NCSE and their role is viewed as essential. When service users engage with NCSE staff who demonstrate high levels of expertise, this expertise is both highly valued and impactful.

All students involved in the evaluation felt they were experiencing inclusive education in their own view. While we cannot generalise this to all students with SEN in Ireland, it does suggest what can be achieved when schools and NCSE frontline services collaborate, even in the face of capacity challenges.

However, experiences and perceptions varied greatly across the dataset, with reports of low responsiveness, poor communication and strained relationships raising significant concerns. Continuous improvement to NCSE frontline services, and to public perceptions of these services and the NCSE, will be vital to achieving a world-class, inclusive education system in Ireland. *Vision 26* provides a framework through which these improvements can be driven. By prioritising increased visibility, responsiveness, communication, personalisation and a more collaborative culture within the NCSE and its frontline services, service-user perceptions and experiences are likely to improve significantly.

Finally, it emerged that the NCSE's frontline services were the right shape for Ireland, but their size and the consistency of their quality needs attention. At the same time, there is an opportunity to evolve a more impact-focused model of service, planning and collaboration so that all stakeholders can work together to achieve a shared vision for inclusion and a shared conceptualisation of the outcomes they are pursuing together.

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Appendix: Survey questionnaires

Parents's survey

NCSE Evaluation – Parents survey J11970

Online

Landing page

- Thank you for your interest in the NCSE Evaluation survey. IFF Research are carrying out this survey on behalf of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in partnership with the University of Derby and Mary Immaculate College (Limerick) to better understand the impact of NCSE services.
- NCSE services cover a wide variety of support measures for children with SEN] their parents and carers, such as:
 - special educational needs organisers (SENOS)
 - the SENO role in reviewing special education teachers (SET)
 - the SENO role in reviewing special needs assistants (SNA)
 - the SENO role in processing additional resources (assistive technology such as hearing aids and writing aids, school transport and HT)
 - the SENO role in supporting you to find a school/class place
 - information and advice for parents and carers
 - visiting teacher support for pupils with hearing and/or visual impairments.

We are interested in hearing views of **parents and carers of children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)** to get your feedback on this support.

This will allow the NCSE to better understand the impact of its services and how best to help children, parents and carers in the future.

For this research, we want to find out about how the NCSE supports and delivers these services rather than about the actual services themselves, that is, the process of allocating and providing the support. We are not evaluating the actual service as it's delivered in the school, for example how the SNAs support your child.

The survey will take about **15 minutes to complete**.

To take part in the survey in English language please click here:

[Link provided for respondents]

To take part in the survey in the Irish language please click here:

[Link provided for respondents]

Participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will be treated in confidence. All data will be added together, and your answers will not be reported in any way that would allow you or your child to be identified. You have the right to have a copy of your data, change your data or withdraw from the research at any point. More details on our GDPR policy are available here [<https://www.iffresearch.com/gdpr/>]. If you have any questions about this survey or your data, please contact IFF researcher, [NAME AND EMAIL]

Further Information [IN A DROPDOWN BOX]

If you wish to confirm the validity of this survey or get more information about aims and objectives, you can contact:

Market Research Society (MRS): 00 44 20 7566 1820

IFF: [NAME AND EMAIL]

We will keep personal details that identify respondents for up to one year after the end of the project (until July 2024). By your personal details we mean your name, your contact details and your responses to this survey. These will be stored securely and used only for this research project and not used for any other purpose. Data collected in the survey will be stored for up to seven years and may be used for academic publications, but there will be no way of identifying you or your child.

Respondent background

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

To start this survey, can you tell us how many children do you have?

One	1	
Two	2	
Three or more	3	
Prefer not to say	X	SCREEN OUT

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

How many of your children have a disability or special educational needs?

None	X	SCREEN OUT
One	1	
Two	2	
Three or more	3	
Prefer not to say	X	SCREEN OUT

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

And how many of your children have been supported by NCSE services?

(By NCSE services we mean all services that NCSE provides, allocates or oversees, including services your child has received as well as any NCSE sources of information and advice).

This could be by email, online or through face-to-face support.

POP-UP BOX TEXT (IF CLICKED BY RESPONDENT)

NCSE services include:

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs)

SENO support in reviewing/allocating special education teachers (SET)

SENO support in reviewing/allocating special needs assistants (SNA)

SENO support in reviewing/allocating additional resources – assistive technology such as hearing aids and writing aids, school transport, home tuition

SENO support in finding a school/class place

Information and advice for parents and carers

Visiting Teacher Service for pupils with hearing and/or visual impairments

None	X	SCREEN OUT
One	1	
Two	2	
Three or more	3	
Not sure, but at least one of my children has been supported by NCSE services	9	
if 1: Please answer the rest of the survey questions about your child who has had support from NCSE, or about whom you've been in contact with NCSE. IF 2, 3 or 9: please answer the rest of the survey questions about your eldest child who has had support from NCSE, or about whom you've been in contact with NCSE. If this child is a twin or triplet, please answer about the eldest child only.		

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

What type of class does your child attend?

Please select the answer that best applies

Mainstream class in a mainstream school	1	
Special class in a mainstream school	2	
Special school	3	
Other type of school/class (please specify)	4	
Don't know	5	
Prefer not to say	6	

if mainstream school (A4 = 1 or 2). (SINGLE CODE)

Is your child's school part of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Don't know	3	

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

And what year group are they in?

Junior infants (4-5 years)	1	
Senior infants (5-6 years)	2	
Primary – First Class (6-7 years)	3	
Primary – Second Class (7-8 years)	4	
Primary – Third Class (8-9 years)	5	
Primary – Fourth Class (9-10 years)	6	
Primary – Fifth Class (10-11 years)	7	
Primary – Sixth Class (11-12 years)	8	
Secondary – First Year (12-13 years)	9	
Secondary – Second Year (13-14 years)	10	
Secondary – Third Year (14-15 years)	11	
Secondary – Fourth Year (15-16 years)	12	
Secondary – Fifth Year (16-17 years)	13	
Secondary – Sixth Year (17-18 years)	14	
Prefer not to say	15	

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

And where is their school located?

Co. Carlow	1	
Co. Cavan	2	
Co. Clare	3	
Co. Cork	4	
Co. Donegal	5	
Co. Dublin – Dublin City	6	
Co. Dublin – Dún Laoghaire Rathdown	7	
Co. Dublin – South County Dublin	8	
Co. Dublin – Fingal	9	
Co. Galway	10	
Co. Kerry	11	
Co. Kildare	12	
Co. Kilkenney	13	
Co. Laois	14	
Co. Leitrim	15	
Co. Limerick	16	
Co. Longford	17	
Co. Louth	18	
Co. Mayo	19	
Co. Meath	20	
Co. Monaghan	21	
Co. Offaly	22	
Co. Roscommon	23	
Co. Sligo	24	
Co. Tipperary	25	
Co. Waterford	26	
Co. Westmeath	27	
Co. Wexford	28	
Co. Wicklow	29	
Prefer not to say	30	

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

[Thinking about the eldest child who has been supported by NCSE services, do they] [Does your child] have a diagnosed disability or special educational need?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Don't know	3	
Prefer not to say	4	

ASK if child has diagnosed disability (A8=1). (SINGLE CODE)

How would you describe your child's primary disability or special educational need?

PLEASE TICK ONE ONLY

Physical disability	1	
Hearing impairment	2	
Visual impairment	3	
Emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	4	
Severe emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	5	
Moderate general learning disability	6	
Severe/profound general learning disability	7	
Autism spectrum disorder	8	
Specific speech and language disorder	9	
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the disabilities listed in the rows above	10	
Multiple disabilities	11	
Something else (please write in)	12	SPECIFY
Don't know	13	EXCLUSIVE CODE
Prefer not to say	14	EXCLUSIVE CODE

ASK if child has diagnosed disability (A8=1). (SINGLE CODE)

And were you aware of this disability or special educational need before your child started school?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Don't know	3	

ASK ALL

Please tell us below if your child has any other disabilities/additional needs.

PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY

Physical disability	1	
Hearing impairment	2	
Visual Impairment	3	
Emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	4	
Severe emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	5	
Moderate general learning disability	6	
Severe/profound general learning disability	7	
Autism spectrum disorder	8	
Specific speech and language disorder	9	
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the disabilities listed in the rows above	10	
Multiple disabilities	11	
Something else (please write in)	12	PLEASE SPECIFY
Don't know	13	EXCLUSIVE CODE
Prefer not to say	14	EXCLUSIVE CODE

Awareness of NCSE

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

Thinking back to before your child started school, which of the following best describes your awareness of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)?

Heard of and understood what they offered	1	
Heard of and knew a little about them	2	
Heard of them, but nothing more	3	
Had not heard of them	4	
Can't remember	5	

ASK if aware of NCSE before child started school (b1=1-3] (MULTI-CODE). RANDOMISE

How did you first hear about the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

Another child in the family had been supported by NCSE	1	
Through friends/wider family members	2	
Through a support organisation	3	
From a medical or care professional	4	
From government publications/adverts/websites	5	
Social media/online support forums	6	
Through pre-school or early learning service	7	
Other way (please specify)	8	[ANCHOR] EXCLUSIVE
Don't know/can't remember	9	[ANCHOR] EXCLUSIVE

Ask if parent not aware of NCSE BEFORE child started school (B1=4-5). (MULTI-code).
RANDOMISE

How did you hear about NCSE when your child started school?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

From teacher/principal or other school staff	1	
From another parent/carer	2	
From a support organisation	3	
From a medical or care professional (such as Health Service Executive)	4	
From government publications/adverts/websites	5	
Social media/online support forums	6	
Other way (please specify)	7	[ANCHOR]
Don't know/can't remember	8	[ANCHOR] EXCLUSIVE
Not aware of NCSE prior to this survey	9	[ANCHOR] EXCLUSIVE
all aware of NCSE (ASK IF B1=1-3 OR B3=1-8) (SINGLE CODE)		

Have you ever visited the NCSE website?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Can't remember	3	

Services provided by NCSE

ASK ALL. (MULTI-CODE)

Which, if any, of the following services or support has your child ever received?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

SENO support in reviewing/allocating special education teachers (SET)	1	
SENO support in reviewing/allocating special needs assistants (SNA)	2	
SENO support in reviewing/processing additional resources (for example specialist equipment, hearing or writing aids)	3	
SENO support in reviewing/processing school transport	4	
SENO support in reviewing/processing home tuition	5	
General SENO support	6	
Visiting Teacher Service for pupils with hearing and/or visual impairments	7	
SENO support in finding a school/class place		
Other NCSE service (please specify)	8	
None/not received any services provided by NCSE	9	EXCLUSIVE
Don't know	10	EXCLUSIVE

ASK IF received services from NCSE (c1=any 1-8).

Only pipe in answers selected at c1

IF MORE THAN ONE ANSWER SELECTED AT C1: In total, how long has your child received each of the following services provided by the NCSE?

Please select one answer for each row

IF ONLY ONE ANSWER SELECTED AT C1: In total, how long has your child received the following service provided by the NCSE?

	Less than 1 year	1-2 years	More than 2 years, less than 5	5 years or longer	Don't know
_1 SENO support in reviewing/allocating special education teachers (SET)	1	2	3	4	5
_2 SENO support in reviewing/allocating special needs assistants (SNA)	1	2	3	4	5
_3 SENO support in reviewing/processing additional resources (assistive technology such as hearing aids and writing aids)	1	2	3	4	5
_4 SENO support in reviewing/processing school transport	1	2	3	4	5
_5 SENO support in reviewing/processing home tuition	1	2	3	4	5
_6 General SENO support	1	2	3	4	5
_7 Visiting Teacher Service for pupils with hearing and/or visual impairments	1	2	3	4	5
SENO support in finding a school/class place					
_8 PIPE IN 'OTHER' ANSWER FROM C1	1	2	3	4	5

ASK IF received services from NCSE (c1=any 1-8).

LOOP C3 FOR EACH ANSWER SELECTED AT C1. ONE answer per row

To what extent has the [TEXTFILL ROW FROM C1] support benefited each of the following?

	A great deal	A fair amount	Just a little	Not at all	(Too early to say)	(Had a negative impact)	(Don't know)
_1 Your child	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_2 You/your partner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_3 Your child's school (for example their teacher)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

IF IMPACTED TO ANY EXTENT AT c3 (C3=1,2,3 on any row). LOOP C4 FOR EACH SERVICE WITH ANY IMPACT AT C3 (NB: only asked once for each service). One answer per row.

And what type of benefit has the [TEXT FILL ROW FROM C3] had?

Improved my child's access to education	1	
Improved my child's educational progress	2	
Improved the development of my child's soft skills such as communication or managing emotions	3	
Improved my child's inclusion within the school	4	
Improved my child's wellbeing	5	
Improved my wellbeing or the wellbeing of other family members	6	
Other (please specify)	7	
Don't know	8	EXCLUSIVE

ASK IF RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM SENO (C1=6). (SINGLE CODE)

Overall, how well, if at all, do you feel the SENO has supported you and your child?

Very well	1	
Fairly well	2	
Not very well	3	
Not at all well	4	
Don't know	5	

if received support from visiting teacher (c1=7) (SINGLE CODE)

[IF ASKED C5: And overall] Overall, how well, if at all, do you feel the visiting teacher has supported you and your child?

Very well	1	
Fairly well	2	
Not very well	3	
Not at all well	4	
Don't know	5	

IF ELIGIBLE FOR C7 AND C8, PUT THEM ON THE SAME screen

If don't believe SENO has supported well (c5=any 3-4) ask c8. (OPEN)

In what ways has the SENO not supported you and/or your child as well as you wanted or expected to be supported.

If don't believe VISITING TEACHER has supported well (c6=any 3-4). (OPEN)

In what ways has the visiting teacher not supported you and/or your child as well as you wanted or expected to be supported.

ASK ALL. (MULTI-CODE)

Which, if any, of the following sources of information and advice offered by NCSE have you ever used or accessed?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

Guides and information from the NCSE website	1	
Videos from the NCSE YouTube channel	2	
Other NCSE guides and information (for example booklets)	3	
Information or advice from your school's special educational needs organiser (SENO) (please specify)	4	[SPECIFY]
Other NCSE information or advice (please specify)	5	[SPECIFY]
None (never used/accessed any information or advice offered by NCSE)	6	
Don't know	7	EXCLUSIVE

ASK those who have accessed advice through NCSE (C9=1-5)

And how useful, if at all, has the following information and advice provided by the NCSE been?

one answer for each row

[DS: SHOW ROWS SELECTED AT C9]

	Very useful	Fairly useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Not sure
_1 Guides and information from the NCSE website	1	2	3	4	5
_2 Videos from the NCSE YouTube channel	1	2	3	4	5
_3 Other NCSE guides and information (for example booklets)	1	2	3	4	5
_4 Your school's special educational needs organiser (SENO) (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5
_5 PIPE IN 'OTHER' ANSWER FROM C10	1	2	3	4	5

Impact of NCSE support on family/child

ASK IF RECEIVED SERVICES FROM NCSE (C1=ANY 1-9 OR C9=1-5). (MULTI-CODE). PIPE IN ANSWERS SELECTED AT C1.

Which of these NCSE services have made the greatest positive difference to you/your child?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

SENO support in reviewing/allocating special education teachers (SET)	1	IF C1=1
SENO support in reviewing/allocating special needs assistants (SNA)	2	IF C1=2
SENO support in reviewing/processing additional resources (for example specialist equipment such as hearing or writing aids)	3	IF C1=3
SENO support in reviewing/processing school transport	4	IF C1=4
SENO support in reviewing/processing home tuition	5	IF C1=5
The Visiting Teacher Service for pupils with hearing and/or visual impairments	9	IF C1=7
Information for parents/carers provided on the NCSE website	6	SHOW ALL
Advice/support from the special educational needs organiser (SENO)	7	IF C1=6 OR C9=4
Other advice or guidance from NCSE (please specify)	8	SHOW ALL
SENO support in finding a school/class place		
Other NCSE service (please specify)	10	SHOW ALL

None of them have made a difference to my child	11	EXCLUSIVE
One or more has had a detrimental impact on my child (please specify)	12	
Too early to say	13	EXCLUSIVE CODE
Don't know	14	EXCLUSIVE CODE

ASK IF RECEIVED SERVICES FROM NCSE (C1=ANY 1-9 OR C9=1-5). (SINGLE CODE PER ROW).

Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, have NCSE services benefited each of the following people?

(By NCSE services we mean all services that NCSE provides, allocates or oversees including services your child directly receives as well as any NCSE sources of information and advice)

	A great deal	A fair amount	Just a little	Not at all	(Too early to say)	(Had a negative impact)	(Don't know)
_1 Your child	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_2 You/your partner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_3 Other children in your family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

LOOP FOR EACH MEMBER where THERE HAS BEEN A BENEFIT (D2=1-2)

In what way has it benefited [TEXT FILL FROM D2]?

WRITE IN

LOOP FOR EACH where THE HAS BEEN OF LITTLE/NO BENEFIT (D2=3 OR 4 or 6)

IF CODE 2 OR 4: Why do you feel there has been limited or no benefit to [TEXT FILL FROM D2]?

IF CODE 6: Why do you feel there has been a negative impact to [TEXT FILL FROM D2]?

WRITE IN

ASK IF RECEIVED SERVICES FROM NCSE (C1=ANY 1-9 OR C=1-5).

(write in box)

What improvements could be made NCSE services?

(By NCSE services we mean all services that NCSE provides, allocates or oversees including services your child directly receives as well as any NCSE sources of information and advice)

WRITE IN		
Don't know/No comments	1	

Recontact permissions

ASK ALL

As part of this evaluation, we are looking to carry out more detailed interviews with parents and carers about their experiences of NCSE services. These interviews will be done over the phone or by video call and will last about an hour. As a thank you for taking part, we will offer a €15 payment.

Is this something you would be happy to be contacted about? By saying yes now, you agree to be contacted to take part in this follow-up research, but you do not have to take part when invited.

Yes	1	
No	2	
Not sure – I would like more information	3	

Ask if E1=1 or 3

Please provide your name, email address and a daytime phone number (with area code) and one of the researchers (from the University of Derby) may be in touch [IF WOULD LIKE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (E1=3): ... 'with additional information'].

WRITE IN

ASK ALL

We will be able to learn more about experiences of working with NCSE and how to improve it by linking your answers to these questions to other information that we collect as part of this evaluation, and to wider data held by NCSE.

Like everything else you have told us, this information will be confidential and used for research purposes only. Names and addresses are never included in the results and no individual will be identified from the research. We will keep personal details that identify you for up to one year after the end of the project. These will be stored securely and used only for this research project and not used for any other purpose.

Data collected from the survey will be kept for up to seven years and may be used in publications. However, your identity will not be revealed as all data will be anonymised.

Do you give permission for your answers to be linked to other information that we collect as part of this evaluation, and to data held by NCSE?

PLEASE TICK ONE ONLY

Yes	1	= CONSENT GIVEN
No	2	= CONSENT NOT GIVEN

Display to all

IFF Research, the University of Derby, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick and NCSE would like to thank you for completing this survey. We really appreciate you giving up your time to help.

Schools Survey

NCSE Evaluation – Schools survey J11970

Online

Introduction email

To be drafted once sample route confirmed, but will include the following details:

IFF Research are carrying out a survey on behalf of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in partnership with the University of Derby and Mary Immaculate College (Limerick) to better understand the experiences of parents/carers whose child(ren) have been supported by the NCSE.

Your responses will be used to understand how the NCSE is providing support to schools across Ireland, and how the service could be improved. It does not matter how much or how little interaction you've had with the National Council for Special Education, we'd still like to hear from you.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate how the NCSE supports or delivers services, for example reviewing allocations of special needs assistants (SNAs) or special education teachers (SETs) and **not** to evaluate the actual services in schools themselves.

We are interested in hearing the views of a range of staff at primary and secondary schools, both those in principal roles and in teaching roles. If you are in a leadership role at your school, we will be asking for your response about your school. If you are in a teaching role, we will be asking for your response about the children/students you teach.

Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary, and responses will be treated in confidence.

The survey will take around 20 minutes to complete

Option to take part in the survey in the English or Irish language:

To take part in the survey in English language please click here:

[Link provided for respondents]

To take part in the survey in the Irish language please click here:

[Link provided for respondents]

Landing page

Welcome!

Thank you for your interest in this survey to understand your experiences of the National Council for Special Education.

The survey is designed to take around 20 minutes to complete. If you need to, you can go back into the online survey on different occasions. Your previous answers will always be saved.

Please click 'Next' to continue.

Helpful information before completing:

Participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. This means that the National Council for Special Education will not know how any individual has responded to the survey.

If you would like to find out more about the research or have any issues or queries about completing the survey, please email IFF Research on [\[EMAIL\]](#)

We will keep personal details that identify respondents for up to one year after the end of the project (until July 2024). By your personal details we mean your name, your contact details and your responses to this survey. These will be stored securely and used only for this research project and not used for any other purpose. Data collected in the survey will be stored for up to seven years and may be used for academic publications, but there will be no way of identifying you or your child

You have the right to have a copy of your data, change your data or withdraw from the research at any point. More details on our GDPR policy are available here [\https://www.iffresearch.com/gdpr/– TO BE INSERTED].

School background

(NB: headers to be programmed into the script ABOVE EACH OF THE FIRST QUESTION IN THE SECTION)

ask all (SINGLE CODE)

Before we start, there are a few questions about your school and your children/students.

Which one of the following best describes your school?

Please select the answer that best applies

Mainstream school without special classes	1	
Mainstream school with special classes	2	
DEIS Not mainstream school without special classes	3	
DEIS mainstream school with special classes	4	
Special school	5	
Other type of school (please specify)	6	
None of these	7	SCREEN OUT

INSTRUCTION TO Data services: ^DEIS to have a hover-over button that says 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools'

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

Which county is your school in?

Co. Carlow	1	
Co. Cavan	2	
Co. Clare	3	
Co. Cork	4	
Co. Donegal	5	
Co. Dublin – Dublin City	6	
Co. Dublin – Dún Laoghaire Rathdown	7	
Co. Dublin – South County Dublin	8	
Co. Dublin – Fingal	9	
Co. Galway	10	
Co. Kerry	11	
Co. Kildare	12	
Co. Kilkenny	13	
Co. Laois	14	
Co. Leitrim	15	
Co. Limerick	16	
Co. Longford	17	
Co. Louth	18	
Co. Mayo	19	
Co. Meath	20	
Co. Monaghan	21	
Co. Offaly	22	
Co. Roscommon	23	
Co. Sligo	24	
Co. Tipperary	25	
Co. Waterford	26	
Co. Westmeath	27	
Co. Wexford	28	
Co. Wicklow	29	
Prefer not to say	30	

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

Which one of the following best describes your job role?

Please select the answer that best applies

Principal	1	
Deputy principal	2	
Class teacher	3	
Special education (SEN) teacher	4	
Postholder with responsibility for coordinating SEND	5	
Special Needs Assistant	6	
Other job/teaching role (please specify)	7	
Prefer not to say	8	SCREEN OUT

DUMMY VARIABLE, DO NOT ASK

a3dum (SINGLE CODE)

Leader	1	A3 = 1 TO 2
Teacher	2	A3= 3 TO 7

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

How many children are on role at your school this academic year?

1-50	1	
51-100	2	
101-150	3	
151-200	4	
201-300	5	
301-500	6	
501-750	7	
571-1,000	8	
1001+	9	
Prefer not to say/don't know	10	

ASK ALL (multi-code)

And what is the age range of children/students IF LEADER: [in your school] IF TEACHER: [whom you teach]?

Please select all age groups that apply

Junior infants (4-5 years)	1	
Senior infants (5-6 years)	2	
Primary – first class (6-7 years)	3	
Primary – second class (7-8 years)	4	
Primary – third class (8-9 years)	5	
Primary – fourth class (9-10 years)	6	
Primary – fifth class (10-11 years)	7	
Primary – sixth class (11-12 years)	8	
Secondary – first year (12-13 years)	9	
Secondary – second year (13-14 years)	10	
Secondary – third year (14-15 years)	11	
Secondary – fourth year (15-16 years)	12	
Secondary – fifth year (16-17 years)	13	
Secondary – sixth year (17-18 years)	14	
Prefer not to say/don't know	15	

ASK ALL (SINGLE CODE)

IF LEADER: Does your school have any children with disabilities/special educational needs on roll this academic year?

IF TEACHER: Do you teach any children with disabilities/special educational needs?

Yes	1	
No	2	
Don't know	3	

ASK IF A6=1 (number box)

How many children with disabilities/educational needs IF LEADER [are currently on role] IF TEACHER [do you teach]?

Please write in your best estimate

WRITE IN	
Don't know	1

ASK IF a7=1 (don't know) (single code)

Please could you give your best estimate of how many children with disabilities/educational needs IF LEADER [are currently on role] IF TEACHER [do you teach] using one of the following groupings?

Please select your best estimate

1-5	1	
6-10	2	
11-20	3	
21-30	4	
31-40	5	
41-50	6	
51-75	7	
76-100	8	
100+	9	
Prefer not to say/don't know	10	

ASK IF a6=1 (multi-CODE)

What type of primary disability/special educational needs do these children have?

PLEASE select all that apply

Physical disability	1	
Hearing impairment	2	
Visual impairment	3	
Emotional disturbance	4	
Severe emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	5	
Moderate general learning disability	6	
Severe/profound general learning disability	7	

Autism spectrum disorder	8	
Specific speech and language disorder	9	
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the disabilities listed in the rows above	10	
Multiple disabilities	11	
Something else (please specify)	12	
Don't know	13	EXCLUSIVE CODE
Prefer not to say	14	EXCLUSIVE CODE

ASK IF a9=any 1-12 (number boxes). Pipe through answers from a9

Please fill in an estimated number of children/students that IF LEADER [are currently on role] IF TEACHER [you teach] against each of the following disability/additional needs.

Physical disability	
Hearing impairment	
Visual impairment	
Emotional disturbance	
Severe emotional disturbance (emotional and behavioural disorders)	
Moderate general learning disability	
Severe/profound general learning disability	
Autism spectrum disorder	
Specific speech and language disorder	
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the disabilities listed in the rows above	
Multiple disabilities	
Other – PIPE THROUGH FROM A9	
Don't know	EXCLUSIVE CODE
Prefer not to say	EXCLUSIVE CODE

ASK ALL (NUMBER BOX)

What is your SET (special education teaching) allocation of hours at your school?

please write in your best estimate

NUMBER OF HOURS:	
Don't know	1
Prefer not to say	2

ALL (NUMBER BOX)

What is your SNA (special needs assistants allocation of posts at your school?

please write in your best estimate

NUMBER OF POSTS:	
Don't know	1
Prefer not to say	2

Awareness and experience of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

ask all (SINGLE CODE)

Which of the following best describes your awareness of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)?

(The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with a particular emphasis on children.)

Know a lot about them	1	
Know a little about them	2	
Heard of them, but nothing more	3	
Had not heard of them prior to this survey	4	SKIP TO E4
Don't know	5	SKIP TO E4

ask all who have heard of NCSE (b1=1-3) (MULTI-CODE PER COLUMN).

RANDOMISE ANSWERS

In which of the following areas, if any, IF LEADER [has your school] IF TEACHER [have you] ever had any dealings of any kind with NCSE, or have you received support from NCSE?

Please include applications for support which are pending as well as support that you've actually received.

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

Review or appeal of the SNA allocation or SET hours for your school	1	
Application for additional resources to support children/students at your school <i>(For example, applications for specialist equipment, home tuition, travel funds, assistive technology)</i>	2	
Support for parents and carers of children/students at your school <i>(For example, provision of published information guides or direct one-to-one support for parents/carers)</i>	3	
Professional development for you or teachers at your school <i>(For example, learning days, seminars, practice guides, topic-specific resources, NCSE annual research conference)</i>	4	
In-school support/advice around implementing SNA resources or SET hours	5	
In-school support/advice around completing an assessment of need or an individualised education plan (IEP) or monitoring the progress of children/students with SEN	6	[ANCHOR BEHIND CODE 5]
In-school support from the Visiting Teacher Service <i>(This service supports children/students who are visually impaired, hard of hearing or who have multisensory impairment)</i>	7	
Working jointly with NCSE in a research or consultative role <i>(For example, being part of a research study or a best practice group, or providing data around outcomes of children/students with SENs)</i>	8	
Other area(s) (please specify)	9	[ANCHOR]
None/never had any dealings with or support from NCSE	10	[EXCLUSIVE]

ask all who have heard of NCSE (b1=1-3). (SINGLE CODE)

Thinking overall about the support and services that NCSE offers, how valuable is this support and service to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

Very valuable	1	
Fairly valuable	2	
Not very valuable	3	
Not at all valuable	4	
Don't know	6	

Ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9) (single answer per row). Pipe through mentions from b2

For each of the areas that you have had dealings with or received support from NCSE, how valuable, if at all, has this NCSE service and support been to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

PLEASE SELECT one answer per row

Only answers selected at b2 shown	Very valuable	Fairly valuable	Not very valuable	Not at all valuable	Don't Know	Too early to say
Review or appeal of the SNA allocation or SET hours for your school	1	2	3	4	6	7
Application for additional resources to support children/students at your school <i>(For example, applications for specialist equipment, home tuition, travel funds, assistive technology)</i>	1	2	3	4	6	7
Support for parents and carers of children/students at your school <i>(For example, provision of published information guides or direct one-to-one support for parents/carers)</i>	1	2	3	4	6	7
Professional development for you/ teachers at your school <i>(For example, learning days, seminars, practice guides, topic-specific resources, NCSE annual research conference)</i>	1	2	3	4	6	7
In-school support and advice around implementing SNA resources or SET hours	1	2	3	4	6	7
In-school support and advice around completing an assessment of need or an individualised education plan (IEP) or monitoring the progress of children/students with SEN	1	2	3	4	6	7
In-school support through the Visiting Teacher Service <i>(This service supports children/students who are visually impaired, hard of hearing or have multisensory impairment)</i>	1	2	3	4	6	7

Working together in a research or consultative role <i>(For example, being part of a research study or a best practice group, or providing data around outcomes of children/students with SENs)</i>	1	2	3	4	6	7
'Other' – PIPE THROUGH OTHER SPECIFY AT B2 [ANCHOR]	1	2	3	4	6	7

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9) (multi-code ANSWERS)

NCSE offers support and services across a variety of topics relating to inclusion and children/students with special educational needs.

For which of the following topics have you ever had received professional development or advice about from NCSE?

PLEASE SELECT all that apply

Implementing your SNA allocation	1	
Implementing your SET allocation	2	
Challenging behaviour	3	
Completing an assessment need or individualised education plan (IEP)	4	
Monitoring the progress of children/students with challenging behaviour	5	
How to make an application for additional resources	6	
Lesson ideas for children/students with special educational needs	7	
Other topics (please specify)	8	
None/no specific topics	9	
Don't know/can't remember	10	

ask if ANY topic selected at b5 (b5=any 1-8) (multi-code ANSWERS). PIPE THROUGH PRE-codes from b5

For which of these topics, if any, did you find the NCSE professional development and advice to be of particular value to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

PLEASE SELECT as many or as few as you think apply

Implementing your SNA allocation	1	
Implementing your SET allocation	2	
Challenging behaviour	3	
Completing an assessment need or individualised education plan (IEP)	4	
Monitoring the progress of children/students with challenging behaviour	5	
How to make an application for additional resources	6	
Lesson ideas for children/students with special educational needs	7	
Other – PIPE IN ANSWER FROM B5	8	
None of particular value	9	
Don't know/can't remember	10	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9) (multi-code ANSWERS). RANDOMISE PRE-CODES

NCSE offers support and services through various channels and resource tools.

Which of these NCSE channels and resource tools, if any, have you IF LEADER [ever used or attended at your school] IF TEACHER [ever used or attended]?

NCSE seminars, lectures and learning days	1	
NCSE annual research conference	2	
Videos on the NCSE YouTube channel	3	
Teaching information packs/school guides	4	
The Inclusive Education Framework <i>(This is an interactive tool to help plan, measure and improve how children/students with SEN are supported)</i>	5	
The NCSE School Support Portal <i>(This is the platform through which you can apply to NCSE for in-school support, funding for approved TPL course and for reviews of the mainstream SNA and SET allocations)</i>	6	
The NCSE website	7	
Other channels/ways (please specify)	8	[ANCHOR]
None/no specific topics	9	[ANCHOR]
Don't know/can't remember	10	[ANCHOR]

ask if ANY channel at b7 (b7=any 1-8) (multi-code ANSWERS). PIPE THROUGH PRE-codes from b7

For which of these channels and resource tools, if any, did you find the NCSE support and services to be of particular value to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

PLEASE SELECT as many or as few as you think apply

NCSE seminars, lectures and learning days	1	
NCSE annual research conference	2	
Videos on the NCSE YouTube channel	3	
Teaching information packs/school guides	4	
The Inclusive Education Framework <i>(This is an interactive tool to help plan, measure and improve how children/students with SEN are supported)</i>	5	
The NCSE School Support Portal <i>(This is the platform through which you can apply to NCSE for in-school support, funding for approved TPL course and for reviews of the mainstream SNA and SET allocations)</i>	6	
The NCSE website	7	
Other – PIPE IN ANSWER FROM B7	8	[ANCHOR]
None of particular value	9	[ANCHOR]
Don't know/can't remember	10	[ANCHOR]

General ratings and improvements

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9)

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the support and services that NCSE offers to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

Very satisfied	1	
Fairly satisfied	2	
Not very satisfied	3	
Not at all satisfied	4	
Don't know	6	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9) (OPEN question)

What would you say is beneficial about the support and services that NCSE offers to IF LEADER [your school?] IF TEACHER [you?]

Please give as much detail as you can, but avoid mentioning specific names of individuals

WRITE IN		
Don't know	1	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9) (OPEN question)

What would you say is not so beneficial about the support and services that NCSE offers, or needs improvement?

Please give as much detail as you can, but avoid mentioning specific names of individuals

WRITE IN		
Don't know	1	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9). (Single code)

Overall, how easy or difficult is it to work with the NCSE?

Very easy	1	
Fairly easy	2	
Not very easy	3	
Not at all easy	4	
Don't know	6	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9). (Single code)

And overall, how relevant is the advice and support given by the NCSE for your particular needs IF LEADER [and profile of children/students at your school?] IF TEACHER [and the types of children/students whom you teach?]

Very relevant	1	
Fairly relevant		
Not very relevant		
Not at all relevant		
Don't know	3	

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9). (Single code)

In your view, how well does the current portfolio of training offered by NCSE meet IF LEADER [your school's] IF TEACHER [your] special education needs (SEN) and inclusion development needs?

Very well	1	
Fairly well	2	
Not very well	3	
Not at all well	4	
Don't know	5	

IF TRAINING DID NOT meet needs (c6=3-4) (multi-code). RANDOMISE

Why does the portfolio of training offered by NCSE not IF CODE C6=2 [fully] meet IF LEADER [your school's] IF TEACHER [your] special education needs (SEN) and inclusion development needs?

Please select all that apply

Doesn't cover the range of topics I/we require	1	
Not sufficiently tailored to the particular needs of my school needs/ too generic	2	
School cannot fund substitute teacher(s) to cover attendance	3	
Training not provided in a format that is suitable	4	
Training not available nearby/convenient location	5	
LEADER: Difficult for staff to find time to attend		
TEACHER: Difficult to find time to attend	6	
LEADER: Staff not interested in attending		
TEACHER: Not interested in attending	7	
Other reason (PLEASE SPECIFY)	8	[ANCHOR]
Don't know	9	[ANCHOR]

IF TRAINING DID NOT meet needs (c6=3-4) (multi-code). (OPEN question)

If you would like to give any comments or feedback on why the portfolio of training provided by NCSE does not IF CODE C6=2 [fully] meet IF LEADER [your school's] IF TEACHER [your] special education needs (SEN) and inclusion development needs, please provide them in the space below.

Please give as much feedback and detail as you can

WRITE IN	
No comments to make	1

Impact of NCSE services and resources

rotate d1 and d2, so each asked first of 50 per cent of the sample. For second rotation add the word 'And ...'

ask all who have had dealings with NCSE (b2=any 1-9). (Single code per row)

Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, do you think the NCSE service and resources have benefited the following aspects IF LEADER [at your school?] IF TEACHER [for you and your school?]

Please select one answer per row

	A great deal	A fair amount	Just a little	Not at all	(Too early to say)	(Had a detrimental impact)	(Don't know)
_1 IF LEADER [Your school's] IF TEACHER [Your] knowledge of how to support children/ students with special educational needs or disabilities	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
_2 IF LEADER: [Your school's] IF TEACHER: [Your] confidence working with children/ students with special educational needs or disabilities	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
Your school's methods and processes in respect of special educational practice	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
Your school's methods and processes in the respect of inclusive practice	1	2	3	4	6	7	8

Taking everything into account, to what extent, if at all, do you think the NCSE service and resources have benefited the children/students and parents/carers at your school?

Please select one answer per row

	A great deal	A fair amount	Just a little	Not at all	(Too early to say)	(Had a detrimental impact)	(Don't know)
_1 Children with disabilities/additional needs [IF LEADER:] 'in your school' [IF TEACHER]: 'whom you teach'	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
_2 Other children [IF LEADER:] 'in your school' [IF TEACHER]: 'whom you teach'	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
_3 Parents and guardians of children with disabilities/additional needs [IF LEADER:] 'in your school' [IF TEACHER]: 'whom you teach'	1	2	3	4	6	7	8
_4 Other parents and guardians	1	2	3	4	6	7	8

ASK ALL WHO MENTION A BENEFIT (D1 OR D2=ANY CODE 1_3).

IF LEADER AND MENTIONED BENEFIT AT BOTH D1 AND D2: In what ways have the NCSE services and resources benefited your school, children/students or parents/carers? Please use the first box to tell us the benefits to your school and the second box for benefits to children/students or parents/carers.

IF LEADER AND MENTIONED BENEFIT AT D1 ONLY: In what ways have the NCSE services and resources benefited your school?

IF TEACHER AND MENTIONED BENEFIT AT BOTH D1 AND D2: In what ways have the NCSE services and resources benefited you, your school, children/students or parents/carers? Please use the first box to tell us the benefits to you/your school and the second box for benefits to children/students or parents/carers.

IF TEACHER AND MENTIONED BENEFIT AT D1 ONLY: In what ways have the NCSE services and resources benefited you and/or your school?

IF MENTIONED BENEFIT AT D2 ONLY: In what ways have the NCSE services and resources benefited children/students or parents/carers at your school?

SHOW BOX IF D1=ANY CODE 1-3:

BOX HEADING IF LEADER **[Benefits to your school]**

BOX HEADING IF TEACHER **[Benefits to you and/or your school]**

WRITE IN		
Don't know	1	

SHOW BOX IF D2=ANY CODE 1-3:

BOX HEADING: Benefits to children/students and/or parents/carers

WRITE IN		
Don't know		1

Recontact permissions

ASK ALL leaders. (SINGLE CODE)

As part of this evaluation, we are planning to carry out case study visits to schools in summer 2023. Would you be interested in participating as a case study?

By saying yes now, you agree to be contacted to take part in this follow-up research but do not have to take part when invited.

Yes	1	
No	2	
Not sure – I would like more information	3	

ASK ALL. (SINGLE CODE)

As part of this evaluation, we are IF LEADER [also] planning to carry out more detailed interviews with leaders and teachers about their experiences of NCSE. These interviews will be done over the phone or by video call and will last about an hour.

Is this something you would be happy to be contacted about? By saying yes now, you agree to be contacted to take part in this follow-up research but do not have to take part when invited.

Yes	1	
No	2	
Not sure – I would like more information	3	

Ask if (E1=1 or 3) or (E2=1 or 3)

Thank you. Please provide your name, email address and a daytime phone number (with area code) and one of the researchers (from the University of Derby or Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) may be in touch [IF WOULD LIKE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (E2=3): ... 'with additional information'].

WRITE IN

ASK ALL

We will be able to learn more about experiences of working with NCSE and how to improve it by linking your answers to these questions to other information that we collect as part of this evaluation, and to wider data held by NCSE.

As with everything else you have told us, this information will be confidential and used for research purposes only. Names and addresses are never included in the results and no individual will be identified from the research.

We will keep personal details that identify you for up to one year after the end of the project. These personal details will be stored securely and used only for this research project and not used for any other purpose. The non-personal data from the survey will be kept for up to seven years and may be used in publications.

Do you give permission for your answers to be linked to other information that we collect as part of this evaluation, and to data held by NCSE?

PLEASE TICK ONE ONLY

Yes	1	= CONSENT GIVEN
No	2	= CONSENT NOT GIVEN

Display to all

IFF Research, the University of Derby, and Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick and NCSE would like to thank you for completing this survey. We really appreciate you giving up your time to help.

If you have any further comments about NCSE that you'd like to make, please write them in the space below.

WRITE IN	
No comments	1
No improvements needed	2



**An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta**
National Council
for Special Education