

# ilíocht

Celebrating Diversity in Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín



## What's On



Middletown Centre for Autism are holding their annual conference entitled "BUILDING CAPACITY".

Apply before 10 February at <https://middletownautism.com/conference-booking>

**Friday, 12 May 2017**

9:15 16:45

**Saturday, 13 May 2017**

9:15 17:00

Titanic Belfast,  
1 Olympic Way,  
Queen's Road, Belfast,  
County Antrim BT3 9EP

**Middletown Centre for Autism** was established in 2007 by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. The aim of the Centre is to promote best practice in the education of children and young people with autism throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Centre provides training, research, learning support and assessment and advice to parents, family members, and educational professionals.



## Spring Time Again

Welcome to the eight edition of ilíocht.

November brought the **National Parents Council (NPC) Conference on Special Education** which took place in the Aisling Hotel in Dublin. "**Getting It Right For Children**" details the points raised during the Parent Consultation Session on the current SNA Scheme. The purpose of the consultation is to provide the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with information to be included in Minister Brutons promised review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme.

**The New Model** for Allocating Resource Hours comes into effect from September 2017 and the response to its announcement has been very mixed. We look at some of the concerns raised regarding the implementation of the model.

**Dr Niall Muldoon** gave an impassioned account of his role as Ombudsman for Children. He spoke about the core competencies of his role, as defined by a number of children brought in to his office for that purpose. Someone who is "brave" and "will fight for us" was what they wanted from their Ombudsman. It got me thinking that these are the attributes that can be seen, and are essential in special needs parents in Ireland today. This constant fight; the fight for diagnosis, the fight for services, the fight for an appropriate education, it all takes its toll and it's so important to be mindful of the levels of stress we live with. **Managing Stress** tries to address some of these issues.

If there is any other topic you would like us to cover please do let us know. If you would like to submit a parent piece, an article of interest or get involved in ilíocht in any way please email,

[celinecronan@gmail.com](mailto:celinecronan@gmail.com)

# NPC Special Education Conference

By Celine Ronan, *ilíocht* Editor

The NPC Special Education Conference took place in November and the afternoon was devoted to a parent consultation session. This objective of the session was to ascertain what is working and what is not working, in regards to the current SNA Scheme. As you may know, the Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton announced a review of the SNA Scheme as part of his new Education Plan. The results of this, and many other consultations, will be collated into a report by the NCSE and submitted to the Minister.

The heading of the one day conference was **"Getting It Right for Children"**. What became very apparent during the afternoons consultation session on the Special Needs Assistants scheme is that we are not getting it right. The overwhelming message was **IT SHOULD NOT BE THIS HARD**. Parents strongly felt that they had to fight for their children from the moment their extra needs became apparent and every step of the way after that and unfortunately this is true of the SNA Scheme too. Some of the points raised were:

- Allocation from the SENO should be based on the child's needs and not on the basis of an official diagnosis.
- This is a point I raised and it was echoed by every table in the consultation. If we had a system where children had speedy access to assessment then the current model might work but the reality is that there are children who are on waiting lists for, not months but years. In the meantime, without the help they obviously need they are falling further and further behind. The current system results in parents trying to find the money to pay for private assessments, which may or may not be accepted by the SENO. I strongly feel that an SNA should be allocated based on the needs of the child. I also felt that more trust and faith needs to be put in the schools ability to determine this.
- "Teaching" is part of the role of an SNA.
- Everyone agreed that SNAs are not Teachers and should not take on the role of Teacher. However it was strongly felt that teaching on a one to one basis (although not recognised or sanctioned as a care need of a child), is actually a part of the SNA's job. A Teacher in a class of 30+ students can only spend so much time going over a piece of work. Depending on the circumstances, some Teachers will give the SNA the work to start/finish with the child while the rest of the class proceed with something else. The overwhelming feeling in the room was that the value of this should be recognised and nurtured and that suitable training in this area should be given (for e.g. training in teaching phonics). There were numerous other functions that an SNA would often perform that most felt should be added to the list of primary care needs, for e.g. keeping a child on task (i.e. refocussing a child with attention problems).
- The bar should be raised in regards to minimum educational requirements for an SNA.
- The current system allows anyone who has achieved a minimum of three "D"s in their junior certificate to apply to be an SNA. While academic achievement wasn't the primary concern, it was felt that some form of formal training is needed to ensure that.
- The person is suitably qualified for the position.
- The person is suitably motivated to do the job, as opposed to it being seen as "an easy option".

- SNA's need to be valued as an essential cog in the wheel.
- This sentiment came under many forms. Most parents agreed that SNA's need more job security – some possible solutions that were suggested included a panel be set up for SNAs who find themselves redundant. Another point raised was that the "last in first out" mentality means that sometimes an SNA with specific skills absolutely essential to the child in question, is made redundant to allow an unskilled longer serving member of staff to replace her. Parents recognised the fact that SNAs often have a close relationship with the child and as such are often aware of vital information such as triggers, motivators, background information which could explain inappropriate behaviours etc. For this reason, it was strongly felt that SNAs should be part of all IEP meetings, although the SENO explained that this will be much more likely with the new system of "care plans" currently being implemented. The availability of education and training was also brought up and the fact that SNAs are excluded from many of the courses available to Teachers.

In summary, it was very evident that the majority of parents attending the consultation today felt that the one to one care provided by our country's SNAs is essential and should continue. However, it was felt that the role needed to be expanded to encompass what is actually happening in reality and that SNAs should receive the support, training and recognition they deserve. A move in this direction would obviously require significant funding and I feel that this area has proved to be an easy target for cuts in the past. However, I think if the Minister is serious about the objective of this review – to "identify the best way to provide better outcomes for learners with special educational needs" then there is no other way forward.

The terms of reference for the review can be found at <http://www.npc.ie/news-post.aspx?contentid=9181>

## WHAT'S ON

### Sensational Kids/Special Needs Parents Association

### Special Educational Needs Conference Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Sensational Kids Special Educational Needs Conference aims to Support, Educate and Empower parents & professionals who work with and care for children with additional educational needs. This one day conference will provide the most up to date research and information on helping students with special educational needs to thrive and will feature seminars about:

- \* Thriving & Surviving In Secondary School
- \* Stress And Why We Need To Understand How It Impacts Learning For All Students With Special Educational Needs
- \* The Worries!
- \* Navigating The SEN & Welfare Systems

Featuring international expert **Dr Jerome Schultz**, an award winning Clinical Neuropsychologist and Lecturer on Psychology, Dept. of Psychiatry Harvard Medical School, this conference will provide you access to leading experts and top quality information to educate, support and empower those who work with and parent children with special educational needs.

This conference will be of particular interest to those who work with or parent children with a variety of special educational needs such as adhd, autism spectrum disorders, down syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, intellectual disabilities and more.

<http://www.specialneedsparents.ie/special-educational-needs-conference-2017#.WJBdmFOLTIU>

# The New Model for Allocating Resource Hours

By Celine Ronan, *ilíocht* Editor

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, the Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, announced the introduction of a new model for allocating Resource Hours which will come into effect from September 2017. This new model was developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with input from parents, teachers, and disability groups.

At the moment, when a child receives certain diagnoses, for example Autism, he automatically receives an allocation of a specific number of hours of teaching outside of the normal classroom. This teaching is often done one to one with the Resource Teacher, but can also take place within small groups. The teaching is specific to the child and the content is based on the child's IEP and planned from the beginning of the year. Sometimes it involves the normal curriculum subjects, for e.g. if the child is falling behind in maths then time would be allocated for one to one work on maths. Sometimes it involves other key areas of development, for extra social skills. Resource Hours differ from Learning Support in this area – Learning Support is allocated for children who have problems with literacy and numeracy, i.e. curriculum subjects only. Learning Support is also allocated in a different way – whereas currently when a child gets a diagnosis of Autism for example, they automatically receive 4.25 hours of Resource Teaching irrespective of whether the teacher thinks they need it or not as opposed to Learning Support Hours where the school receives an allocation of total hours and they distribute those hours based on the needs of the children in their care.

## So what changes can you expect from this new model?

The biggest change is in the way the Resource hours will be allocated. Children will no longer automatically receive a set number of hours when they are diagnosed. Instead, the school will be given a total number of hours in January to allocate on a needs basis. This means:

- (a) Children who need support can receive that support immediately.

With the current model, children cannot receive support without a diagnosis. Unfortunately they can literally be waiting YEARS for assessments to take place.

- (b) Schools will receive one total allocation in January which will allow them to plan and timetable more efficiently. It will also relieve some of the administrative burden of sending in separate applications.
- (c) An extra 900 teaching posts are being made available to support this new model. This is to ensure that no school will receive an allocation less than what they currently have in the 2016/17 school year.

There have been mixed reviews of the new model from both Teaching staff and the special needs community. While both groups recognise the importance of early intervention, and this model should give Teachers the tools to at least begin some intervention, there are concerns around some aspects of the model. While the Dept has insisted that no school will receive an allocation less than what they currently have for the first year of the models introduction. It's unclear what will happen in the following years. This is of huge concern.

Their proposed method of profiling schools to ascertain their allocation is a little worrying. They are giving a baseline support of 20% and additional support after that is calculated on a number of factors – children enrolling in Primary School who are under the care of a disability team, standardised testing, gender and social deprivation factors. However, in an area like North Dublin, where it's notoriously difficult to access disability teams, does that not leave us back where we started – disadvantaged because of the lack of services??? And for those children starting Naíonán Bheaga in need of help, where standardised testing can't be taken in account, how exactly will their needs be ascertained and met? It's also unfortunate that the disadvantage currently faced by Gaelscoileanna in regards to allocations for learning support, i.e. they have the same allocation as English speaking schools but provide support for three subjects to their two, still hasn't been addressed.

In addition to the concerns above, parents are also worried if school staff will receive adequate training on how to identify needs. They would like more information on how the model will be evaluated to see if it's actually working and there are considerable concerns around the right to appeal. Initial press releases only mentioned the option of appealing to the schools Board of Management if you feel your child's allocation is not adequate and the general feeling of the special needs community was that this was too much autonomy to give to a school. However the Special Needs Parents Association (one of the organisations involved in the Department of Education consultations) has since issued a clarification document after a meeting with the Department to address these concerns.

The following is an excerpt of that document and can be found on <https://www.facebook.com/SNPA>

## The New Model for Allocating Resource Hours continued from page 4

**Q: Will there be an Audit/Measurement of impact of new model for allocating teaching supports?**

While schools will have greater autonomy in how to utilise the additional teaching supports, they will for the first time have to account for their use. In order to monitor the use of the block allocation to schools and following negative feedback from stakeholders on previous and current reports of misuse of resource hours, the Dept. is currently developing a self-reflective tool for schools and an annual audit tool and outcomes framework. The School Inspectorate will be beefed up in capacity to manage the annual audit of the 3000 schools. While the Dept. had envisaged including performance indicators such as the number of pupils with educational plans, the number of pupils receiving additional support etc., we have suggested that parental and pupil satisfaction with the additional supports also be measured and more holistic indicators also be used. The audit and measurement framework will be reviewed by stakeholders once drafted later in the year.

**Q: What are the plans for an Appeals process?**

The Dept. is proposing two appeals processes (neither is finalised yet). The first appeal process is for schools to appeal their block allocation of teaching hours. The process will involve an "independent" person employed by the NCSE (the Department did not provide more clarity on this when questioned as to how this could be interpreted as an "independent" officer). This person will have permission to access the school's profile submitted to the Education Research Centre who process the data in the school profiles and calculate the volume of hours for the schools block allocation according to the allocation model criteria.

The Independent official will give the school the opportunity to rectify any errors in data on the initial school profile submitted or update where circumstances would dramatically alter the profile of the school (e.g., a family with a couple of children with SEN enrolling into a small school). If the officer decides that no changes will be made to the initial allocation and the school still objects and maintains it is not enough, then the ISS will send in a team to work with the school on planning and utilisation of the additional teaching support. If the team feel that there is a need for further teaching hours to be allocated after their input then the NCSE has a reserve of teaching posts that they can allocate to cover such instances.

If a parent is unhappy with the allocation to their child, the first port of call is the class teacher/special teacher to review the educational plan which should set out how the additional teaching resources are being used to meet agreed goals that parents/pupils should be involved with in drafting and signing off on. If still an issue then the local school complaints process has to be followed. It was suggested that the local SENO mediate the process if required. Once that has been exhausted and the parent is not satisfied with the result, then an official complaint can be made to the Ombudsman for Children. The OCO is currently in talks with the Dept. to set out the extent of its remit in educational appeals. The Dept. is of the view that if a school has put in place an agreed educational plan (essentially non statutory IEPs by the back door), then it reduces the likelihood of disputes between parents and

Principals if the agreed plan is followed and referred back to if a parent feels it is not meeting the needs of the pupil.

All of the above is not yet decided on, but this is an account of what the Dept. are looking at by way of appeals process and Circulars outlining the finalised process will be issued to schools in the next few months. SNPA has consistently proposed an Independent element to the Appeals Process as our experience from parents is that where a relationships break down with a school or school Principal, parents rarely get a positive outcome for their child regardless of the merit of the problems identified.

**Q: What Training for Principals and teachers on allocating additional teaching supports is available?**

Training will be rolled out from next month for Principals to support the implementation of Dept. Circulars which set out the allocation process at school level. The Circulars will be sent out to schools in the next two weeks and will supersede Circular 02/05 which outlined the scheme for Learning Support and Resource Hours (e.g. the current diagnosis based system). Accompanying guidance materials will also be issued. The issue of training for teachers in SEN in general was also raised by SPNA as a separate issue as the NCSEs own commissioned research previously indicated that only 50% of teachers directly involved in special education roles had any additional training in special education. The Dept. replied that the teacher training colleges and Special Education Support Service (SESS) have been working together to improve the special education components of the initial teacher training courses and CPD available for teachers as this issue has been raised by all the educational stakeholders.

**Q: What does this mean for children currently in school who already qualify for Resource Hours?**

Children currently in school with Low Incidence resource hours, will still have those hours accounted for in the block allocation to schools regardless of whether the school profile indicates that the school should have a reduced allocation based on its profile. The Dept. have decided that no schools will have their current allocation reduced and have provided 900 additional teaching posts to support the implementation and to support demographic increases between now and 2019 when the schools will be required to submit an updated profile. 2000 schools will maintain their current teaching allocation which consists of the current Learning Support and Resource Teachers in the school (They will have one title from next September). 1000 schools will have an increase to their additional teaching staff which they will be informed of in the next few weeks to commence recruitment and workforce planning for September. The Dept. are adamant that adding over 3000 additional special teaching posts in the past few years plus the 900 extra to support the implementation and demographic changes over the next two years, more than address the 15% reduction imposed on children since 2011.

I personally feel that this new model is a step in the right direction, with a move away from waiting for diagnosis and an emphasis on early intervention but as a wise woman once said "The Devil is in the detail." I think only time will tell if the government is going to back up this model with the resources it needs to be successful.

# Managing Stress

By Celine Ronan

In our hectic world, stress has become a fact of life for most of us. A certain amount of stress can actually be beneficial, motivating us to achieve goals and some studies have shown it may even prompt our immune system to work more effectively. However too much stress can have a hugely detrimental effect on our body and mind. If you find that stress is consistently causing sleepless nights, an increase in anxiety or changes in appetite for example, it's time to look at reducing your stress levels. Easier said than done when you're the parent of a child with special needs! Some of the extra causes of stress we deal with include:



## MANAGING DIFFICULT BEHAVIOURS

Managing challenging behaviour can take a serious toll. Parents often disagree on discipline which leaves one parent feeling like the "baddie". Even when both parents are on the same page, managing these behaviours from morning till (and often through the) night is stressful. When you add the stress of putting the behaviour, and your response to it, on view to the public then we can be talking about serious stress. Top of the wish-list of special needs parents is awareness and understanding. Understanding that when you choose to ignore a small misdemeanour that it's not because you don't discipline your child and it's certainly not "the reason he's the way he is". It's because due to his impulsivity, most of the day involves reprimanding and consequences so if you can give him a break on something small then you do.

## FINANCIAL

Many special needs parents give up their career to care for their children as the constant therapy appointments are very difficult to juggle with a full time job. This can be a huge readjustment for someone who had always worked and had that independence. Likewise, the cost of sourcing private therapies can be a huge financial strain, even without the loss of one wage.

## SLEEP DEPRIVATION

Many children with special needs have difficulty either falling asleep, staying asleep and in some cases both. Sleep deprivation is a debilitating reality for those parents.

## MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Parents of children with medical conditions have the added complication of hospital visits and the worry of what lies ahead for their child.

## DEALING WITH FAMILY

It's not uncommon for family conflicts to arise after a diagnosis. Some people may feel the diagnosis is unwarranted. Some feel the parent is at fault by being too strict/lenient etc.

## SIBLINGS

Guilt is a common feeling experienced by parents of kids with special needs. If they have spent enough time with the child with needs on OT exercises, speech therapy homework or social skills homework then they feel guilty because they wasn't much time left for the child's sibling. If they've spent quality time with the sibling, they feel guilty about not spending enough time on therapy homework! Often there are places where the family cannot go because of sensory issues so they either don't go or split into groups or don't spend the day as a family. Even if the day has gone well, lots of parents lie in bed thinking they should be doing more for their kids.

## FEAR OF THE FUTURE

This is a very real stressor for lots of families. Some parents of children requiring full time care wonder who will care for them when they die. Even parents of higher functioning children fear what the future may hold for their children.

## MANAGING STRESS - "When help is offered, TAKE IT."

### FIND SUPPORT

There are many different support groups available either in the local community or online. Remember Us is a Balbriggan based group catering for all disabilities. North Fingal Parents and Children Support offer support for families affected by ADD/ADHD. Dyslexia Ireland have a branch in Balbriggan, as does Fingal Autism and Aspergers Support. For a lot of parents, the idea of walking into a support meeting can be frightening but I guarantee you'll get a warm welcome. If local support groups are too daunting then start with online support groups where you can find literally thousands of parents who have walked in your shoes. (It's likely you'll get to know local parents that can make that first day in a local group a little less daunting!). See our support section for details of local and online groups.

### LOOK FOR FINANCIAL HELP

If your child needs care that significantly exceeds the care an average child would get then you are entitled to Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA). When most parents of children hear "care that significantly exceeds ..." they automatically think that their child doesn't qualify. You have to remember that the average child doesn't need to be brought to therapies, have therapy homework done, visual schedules to get the simplest of tasks completed, window locks on upstairs windows, huge amounts of time and frustration spent on homework (well ok, I'll give you that one 😊) Social stories before they go somewhere new. You get the picture? DCA is notoriously difficult to be awarded and they seem to reject the majority of first time applications (maybe in the knowledge that lots of parents don't have the fight left in them to

appeal?) However a recent survey by DCA Warriors has shown that 80% of those refused will win on appeal. Check out [www.DCA Warriors](http://www.DCAWarriors.com) for more information and lots of help on how to apply. If you are awarded DCA then you may also qualify for the means tested Carers Allowance.

### WHEN HELP IS OFFERED TAKE IT!

Accepting help doesn't make you weak – it helps you remain strong. Whether it's an offer of a couple of hours babysitting or whatever, take it!! The kids will survive without you!

### HEALTHY BODY/HEALTHY MIND

Looking after our body is so important. There are serious links between what we put into our bodies and our state of mind. A diet of processed or sugary foods can leave our energy levels and mood low. Try to incorporate some fruit and vegetables into your diet (even if you're little one won't touch it!) Dehydration will have a similar effect so keep a bottle of water beside you and keep sipping throughout the day. When it comes to exercise, even a couple of hours of exercise a week will have an impact on our mood, not to mention the advantage of the "head space" a brisk walk gives us!

### HELP SIBLINGS DEAL WITH THEIR FEELINGS

It's important for them to know that it's ok to be angry/frustrated etc. There are lots of books that deal with this subject in both the school and local library. Look out for sibling groups in local organisations e.g. Remember Us and Abacus Drogheda both hold groups and events for siblings.

## WHAT'S ON

### BALBRIGGAN CODERDOJO IS NOW OPERATIONAL!

It's a club for children to learn about coding with other like-minded people. To register your interest you must fill in the form on their website and you will get an alert when free tickets are available for the next session (It normally runs every second Sunday)

Register for tickets on <http://coderdojobalbriggan.com/>

# Support Groups

**DCA WARRIORS** is a closed Facebook group and an invaluable source of information on applying for Domiciliary Care Allowance  
<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dca%20warriors>

**REMEMBER US** are a Balbriggan based group which caters for children and young adults with special needs. They organise fun activities like baking, crafts etc. at their premises in addition to days out and respite breaks for the whole family. They also include siblings in their activities. They can be contacted at  
<https://www.facebook.com/FingalRememberUs/>  
 or contact **Nora or Anne 086 045 7003**.

**FRIENDS OF AUTISM/ADHD** provide an Advocacy Service available to anyone who has any questions about anything to do with Autism or Attention deficit disorders. They also organise psychological assessments for those in need of them, in addition to running respite breaks once a year for siblings of those with autism/ ADHD in their family. We run education and awareness courses for carers and teachers such as Aspergers teacher training, talks on managing behavioural issues, mindfulness courses etc. They can be contacted at **102 Strand Street Skerries Co. Dublin** or contact **01 8495670 / 087 2780899**

**THE BALBRIGGAN BRANCH of the DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND** runs a Workshop on Tuesday evenings from 5.30pm to 7.30pm in St. Mologa's National School, Balbriggan. The workshop is for children and young people who have been assessed as having dyslexia. The aim of the workshop is to offer specialised tuition for students and also to provide support and information for parents and families. All tutors in at the workshop are fully qualified teachers who have had special training in helping students with dyslexia. For more information please contact the Branch Coordinator for the Balbriggan Branch: **Colin Leonard, [balbriggan@dyslexia.ie](mailto:balbriggan@dyslexia.ie), 087 149 9870** (after 3pm).

**SPECIAL NEEDS PARENTS ASSOCIATION** is an organisation set up by parents to give support and information to other parents. They regularly consult with Government on policy changes and provide an excellent source of information on what's happening in regards to special needs legislation. They can be contacted on <http://www.specialneedsparents.ie> or [info@specialneedsparents.ie](mailto:info@specialneedsparents.ie)

**SNOWFLAKES AUTISM SUPPORT** is a Swords based group that provides support to parents and organises therapies at reduced fees and fun days out for children, including siblings. They can be contacted at [info@snowflakes.ie](mailto:info@snowflakes.ie) or [www.snowflakes.ie](http://www.snowflakes.ie)

**ABACUS DROGHEDA** is a school for children with ASD but under the banner of Louth/Meath Autism Support they organise a youth club for children with Autism and sibling workshops, all of which include children not attending the school. Contact them at <http://www.autismsupportlouth.com/contact/>  
 Mobile: **087 240 7431** Email: [jacintawalsh1@gmail.com](mailto:jacintawalsh1@gmail.com)

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*ilíocht* Celebrating Diversity in Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín