

# Professionalisation for Special Needs Assistants: Research from Fórsa Trade Union

## Introduction

Fórsa Trade Union represents approximately 8,000 Special Needs Assistants. These SNAs are divided into four regional Branches within the Union: North Dublin North Leinster (NDNL), South Dublin South Leinster (SDSL), Munster, and Connacht/Ulster. The Branch Executive Committees of the four regional Branches help to direct national activity, determined by the Education Divisional Executive Committee, on which all four branches are represented.

As part of the Fórsa's ongoing campaign for better terms and conditions of employment for SNAs, a national survey was carried out in September 2017. This survey asked respondents a variety of questions from assigned work, the 72 hours, to the month of June. 2688 members completed the survey within a few days equating to a participation rate of 33%, which is a notably high return rate for a survey.

Gaining recognition for the role of the SNA has long been a core campaign for Fórsa, with the objective of keeping the rights of children central and ultimately, achieving professionalisation for the grade. This survey has provided the Union with a number of key statistics which allow for campaigning to continue on a number of issues. These relate to:

1. Continuous Professional Development and Training – SNAs are keen to engage further with education programmes and training courses in order to better support students with additional needs.
2. Minimum Qualifications Requirements – Results from Fórsa's research supports long-known anecdotal suggestions that SNAs are, on average, vastly more qualified than the minimum required qualifications for the role.

This report will further explore these results from the Fórsa National SNA Survey, examining the need for further development of both training and qualifications for Special Needs Assistants, and the interplay of this with other national recommendations for the role.

## The SNA Scheme

In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills undertook a review of the SNA Scheme for the period between 2007/8 and 2010. The objectives of this review was to evaluate and make recommendations relating to the effectiveness and value of the SNA Scheme.

Three key findings of the report found:

1. “The provision of SNA support has contributed significantly to the enhancement of students’ experiences in schools.” – (p 12)
2. “The SNA Scheme has assisted in enabling as many students as possible to be included in mainstream schools.” – (p 13)
3. “The SNA Scheme continues to be relevant to enable schools to meet the additional care needs of some students with disabilities.” – (p 14)

The increase in the SNA allocations year on year provide us with an insight into the success of the Scheme, with more children being identified as having additional educational needs. With continued campaigns from within Fórsa, further resources to support these children have been allocated, ensuring that children with special educational needs can fully access education.

*Figure 1: SNA Allocations between the years of 2008 and 2016.*

Year	Number of SNAs
2008	10,442
2009	10,342
2010	10,543
2011	10,575
2012	10,575
2013	10,745
2014	11,330
2015	12,040
2016	13,015

(Kildare Street, 12 April 2017, available at: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-04-12a.339>)

With over 14,000 SNA posts in 2017, and a further increase in the allocations due for 2018/19, it is clear that the SNA Scheme has been extremely successful as it continues to expand.

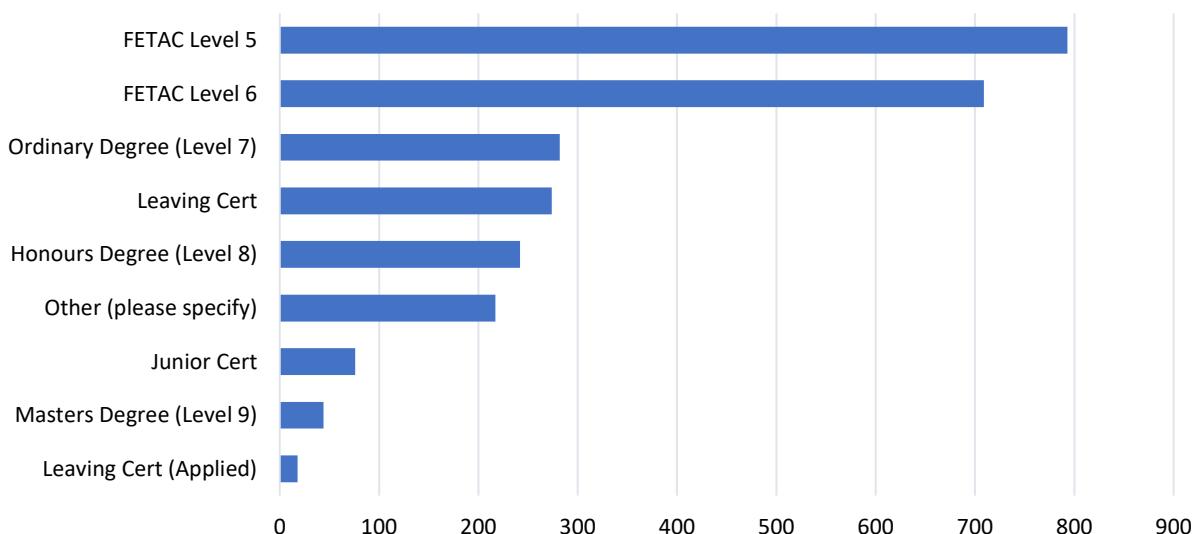
It is certain that much of the success of the SNA Scheme can be attributed to the dedication of the SNAs who work with students with additional needs who have delivered the above outcomes of improving student experiences and enabling inclusion. Although knowing this anecdotally from experiences with members, the National Fórsa SNA Survey aimed to gain better statistical insight in order to further develop a narrative around the SNA role and experience.

## The Fórsa National SNA Survey

From Department of Education Circular 0021/2011, the minimum requirement of qualifications for an SNA is a FETAC level 3 major qualification, a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate, or an equivalent qualification.

In order to further explore options for qualifications and training of SNAs, participants were asked to give their highest level of qualifications, yielding an overwhelmingly positive result and showing the highly qualified nature of members. Options given to members as a response were: Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Cert (Applied), FETAC Level 5, FETAC Level 6, Ordinary Degree (Level 7), Honours Degree (Level 8), Masters Degree (Level 9) and Other, which included a place for respondents to state qualifications other than those listed. Responses given can be seen in Figure 2 (below).

**Figure 2. Responses on Participants' Highest Qualification (Total)**



The majority of respondents have a FETAC Level 5 (30%) or a FETAC Level 6 (27%). Only 3% of respondents have the minimum qualification of a Junior Certificate.

Answers given by respondents other than those provided totalled 8% overall and included: Diplomas (in areas such as Special Needs, Childcare, Family Studies, Montessori Teaching, and Social Care Studies), Graduate Diplomas, and BTEC qualifications.

It is evident that there is a wide variety of qualifications in a variety of different fields held by those who work as SNAs. It is also clear that SNAs across the country are much more highly qualified than the minimum qualification requirement for the role, “a FETAC level 3 major qualification on the national framework of qualifications or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Cert or Equivalent”.

Participants were also asked whether they would be interested in receiving training focussed on Circulars which outline their terms and conditions of employment, and further asked to state the areas in which they would like this to training to focus. **82% of respondents said they would be interested in this training.** The responses overwhelming sought training on the 72 hours, the working week, and

handling issues within the workplace. A number also stated that they would like to receive training in health and safety, manual handling, and working with challenging behaviours.

## Training for SNAs in Fórsa

It is evident through the Survey that the SNA workforce is highly qualified. However, it must be noted that these levels of qualifications are usually obtained on their own time and at their own expense. It must be further noted from our Survey that SNAs are vastly experienced, with 60% having worked as an SNA for over 11 years. With an evolving role, new behaviours being identified, and emerging changes in best practice for handling them, the need for consistent Continuous Professional Development accessible to all SNAs is clear.

In the 2011 Review, the Department of Education stated that 1484 SNAs had completed their Introductory Programme between 2005 and 2011. 480 had completed their Certificate Programme between those years. From 2007, 186 SNAs allocated to classes for students with ASDs had been provided CPD. With over 14,000 SNA posts across the country allocated in 2017, the number of SNAs accessing any Department training is minimal.

The SNA Branches of Fórsa Trade Union have long provided training sessions for members as part of their membership. This training has, over the last number of years, focused on aiding SNA in their work with SEN children. This has included working with children with autism, practicing mindfulness, and handling challenging behaviours. Two extremely successful events included addresses from renowned autism expert, Dr Temple Grandin, and Adam Harris, founder of autism awareness organisation, As I Am.

In 2016, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection published a report on “The Role of the Special Needs Assistant”. This report sought to examine the role of the SNA following reports that this role was, in practice, expanded on the ground to include duties not included in DES Circular 0030/2014. The recommendations from this report further supports the need for training for SNAs.

One recommendation suggests “a mandatory, standardised training and course structure needs to be developed and implemented. A clear and defined structure would achieve further professionalisation of the role, set a minimum standard of qualification for all SNAs and would provide the necessary skills needed at primary and post-primary to fulfil their roles.” The introduction of standardised training would allow for a minimum standard of care for SEN children, ensuring that the rights of the students who most need support are placed at the heart of policy-making. The Fórsa National SNA Survey shows that the vast majority of SNAs already hold qualifications above the minimum requirement, with many seeking further courses and qualifications in order to further upskill.

A further recommendation states “a Continuous Professional Development programme which provides equal regional access needs to be introduced for SNAs as soon as practicable.” The appetite for CPD among SNAs cannot be doubted, with waiting lists for Union training consistently proving the demand for information.

Following on from the responses received in the National SNA Survey, the four SNA Branches have also been providing regular training for members which focusses on Circulars from the Department of Education and Skills. This training covers Circulars relating to issues such as the 72 hours, grievance procedures, and the Contract of Employment. This training has been incredibly well-received by members who often say that this information is otherwise difficult to access.

This training provided by the Union aligns with a recommendation for the 2011 Department Review. It recommended that “the content of training programmes for SNAs should be linked to the role of the SNA as detailed in Department circulars” (p 17). This report, however, also states that the Department should consider how to best approach the training needs and training programmes for SNAs.

Although training is currently being provided for SNA members by the Fórsa Branches, the case for further national development is clear. The training provided by Branches can be on an ad hoc basis and standardisation can be difficult as a result of this. For those accessing training outside of the Union, no allocated time or financial support is provided, leading to many SNAs upskilling during their own time and at their own financial cost. In providing such training, as outlined in two aforementioned Government-sponsored reports, the State can ensure that the rights of SEN children are being vindicated. This training will guarantee consistency, sustainability, guaranteed standards, and accessibility for all SNAs.