

**“That Cork County Council acknowledges the ongoing shortage of places in special education classes for students with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis at secondary level.**

**That if the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) identifies a need for additional special education classes at either primary or secondary level in a defined geographical area, the Department of Education and Skills would require schools in the geographical area to respond to this identified need by establishing an adequate number of such special education classes to match that need.**

**That the necessary funding for both the set-up and running of these special education classes would be provided by the Department.**

**That this need is not unique to Cork and consequently that this motion is circulated to all other local authorities in Ireland for their consideration and support.”**

In 1996, the European Parliament adopted a written declaration called the ‘Charter for Persons with Autism’. Two of the key tenets of this Charter include:

1. THE RIGHT of people with autism to live independent and full lives to the limit of their potential;
2. THE RIGHT of people with autism to accessible and appropriate education;

At that time (1996), the Irish Society for Autism completed a survey on children and adults with Autism. The study identified an overall prevalence of 1 in 2,000 births. Since then the numbers of children being diagnosed have further increased to 1 in 100 children. The most recent study carried out by the Cambridge University Autism Research Centre indicates that 1 in 58 children will have some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Mainstream classes aren’t always the best setting for a child with Autism Spectrum. But some students may be able to attend an ASD unit within a mainstream school which will allow them to integrate into a mainstream school community, participate as far as possible in the curriculum, but with additional supports and resources. These work extremely well, allowing young people with autism to optimise their sometimes very gifted abilities, whilst getting the additional support they need in other areas.

Each ASD unit has places for 6 students. At secondary school level, each unit is allocated 1.5 dedicated teaching posts and 2 special needs assistants. Funding of 6.5k is given to setting up the unit. Schools with ASD units have found this to be sufficient. Yet at present there are only 15 ASD specific classes in mainstream secondary schools in Cork City and 34 in the whole of Cork County. These are just nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of students coming from ASD classes in primary school, not even including those in special schools who are able to attend mainstream school nor those who are in mainstream school and need ASD units. And despite this, two of the existing units in Cork City are to be closed for the coming academic year.

This situation is not in any way unique to Cork. Questions about the availability of ASD places at secondary school level have been raised time and time again in the Dáil. And whilst the Department defends current policy, the real issue appears to be that schools are allowed to choose whether they wish to establish an ASD unit or not. This is despite the often desperate need of students, their families and pleas for assistance from the National Council for Special Education.

If the National Council for Special Education identifies that there is a need for additional ASD units in an area, the Special Educational Needs Organiser whose function it is to link

between the school and the NCSE, should be able to work with all schools in that area to see that those units are established. Schools should not be able to pick and choose whether they want an ASD unit or not, but collaboration with the Special Educational Needs Organiser should help to identify the most appropriate schools within an area of need whilst helping to iron out any concerns those schools may have.

I ask for your support to make this request to the department; that the element of choice on the part of the secondary school with regard to establishing an ASD unit in an area of need would be removed. Because this is an issue that is so deeply felt countrywide, I ask for your support to circulate this motion to the other local authorities so that they too may make the same request of the department.