

An Evaluation of the work of Special Schools within the Area Learning Communities

April 2013

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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

1. Introduction

1.1 The Department of Education (DE) established Area Learning Communities (ALCs) to enable post-primary schools within a local area, both individually and collectively, to determine their priorities for the delivery of the Entitlement Framework (EF). The ALCs operate across Northern Ireland and involve post-primary schools from all sectors.

1.2 The ALCs provide a forum within which schools can plan a comprehensive curricular offer and also an opportunity for the sharing of good practice and expertise. This action can help to prevent courses running with small class sizes or duplication of provision.

1.3 Participation by a school within their local ALC is voluntary. Partnerships can also be formed across different ALCs if schools feel that this method is more appropriate for their pupils' needs; therefore the area boundaries of an ALC are not definite.

1.4 There are currently 30 ALCs in Northern Ireland. DE is committed to ensuring that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) have access to a full and appropriate offer of courses under the EF. For this reason, special schools are full and active members of the ALCs. DE has prioritised achievement for SEN pupils and is working with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the Curriculum Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and special schools to ensure that the EF can be tailored to their needs.

2. Context of the report

2.1 This report is intended to inform the work of ALCs to sustain and embed provision for pupils who have SEN. The report focuses on the contribution of special schools to the work of ALCs. The work of the special schools is evaluated within the context of their current position within the ALC and through their efforts to improve the capacity of the ALC to extend the opportunities for pupils with SEN to have access to a wider range of courses and accreditation pathways.

2.2 The report recognises the variations in practice and the journey which individual special schools have made to ensure their place within ALCs. The report identifies the benefits of special school participation in, and their contribution to, the SEN work of ALCs.

2.3 During the evaluation, the special schools highlighted as challenges to development, the level of recognition by mainstream schools of the potential value of special schools' involvement and the continued funding of ALCs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Between 5 and 9 November 2012, a team of five inspectors conducted evaluations of 16 special schools' participation in ALCs. In addition, a short questionnaire was issued to all of the special schools to inform the evaluation; all schools completed the questionnaire by the end of November.

3.2 During the school visits, the inspectors:

- talked to principals, teachers and, where possible, pupils about their experience of the ALC; and
- scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the completed questionnaire, and evaluated the contribution each school had made to their ALC.

3.3 The inspectors evaluated the work of individual special schools under five headings which were used corporately to formulate the main findings of the report, namely:

- the ALC's main priorities/activities;
- how the priorities inform and enhance the work of the special schools;
- how the special schools' participation informs the work of the ALC;
- the overall benefits of special schools involvement in ALCs; and
- what could be improved.

The schools were also asked if there was a need for a separate special school area learning community, as this was raised by a small number of special school principals during the preparation of this survey.

4. The Findings

The overall ALC concept is widely valued by special schools, and all are benefiting from their participation.

4.1 At this stage, the vast majority of the special schools are working well within the ALCs and contributing to the key priorities. A significant minority are able to engage in a leadership role, chairing the ALC or a sub group established to focus entirely on extending the curriculum and accreditation opportunities for pupils with SEN.

4.2 Through the funding, special schools have been able to engage in more collaborative activities at a level not possible previously. Taking into consideration the key priorities of the ALCs, the special schools have extended their access to accreditation and curriculum courses and been enabled to develop greater curriculum choice. This action has enabled pupils to be more informed regarding their choices when they leave the special school.

4.3 The development in special schools of entry level vocational courses is providing pupils with a clear pathway to accreditation; this pathway may be useful for mainstream schools to support some pupils who are not likely to achieve accreditation through the more common routes.

4.4 A minority of the ALCs have begun to explore the use of the virtual learning environment to extend course access and share learning across the schools. This action has the potential for development and is cost effective.

4.5 Where the ALCs have fully embraced the special schools, as indicated in the schools' questionnaire returns, many are developing effective and mutually beneficial working relationships, through the sharing of resources, holding joint staff development training sessions, and responding appropriately and flexibly to provide greater curriculum choice.

4.6 As the ALCs have developed, the quality of curriculum choice has improved for the majority of the participating special schools. As a result of the careers, education, advice, information and guidance sub groups' work, pupils across schools are benefiting from the information sessions and access to entry and higher level courses, including GCSE and BTEC courses; one special school, for example, now offers 23 courses to its pupils.

4.7 A majority of the ALCs have established SEN or special educational needs co-ordinators' sub groups which are helping to raise the profile of SEN and promote professional development. In these instances, staff share views and experiences with growing confidence; for example, training for classroom assistants in a few ALCs has enabled special schools to demonstrate how they deploy this resource and has led to discernible improvements across participating schools. In the more effective but less frequent practice, pupils learn alongside their peers in special and mainstream schools; they achieve well as a result and enhance their social skills in the wider learning environment. The establishment of a sub group for SEN in all ALCs could ensure that learning support is fostered and promoted, particularly for pupils in mainstream schools, who have SEN.

5. Recommendations

Next steps to develop and sustain the participation of special schools in ALCs.

5.1 All of the special schools have made very good efforts to achieve their current levels of involvement in ALCs. In their responses to the questionnaire and during visits, all of the principals of the special schools valued highly the ALC; the majority have a good understanding of the potential of the ALC, how it works and how it reflects the EF intentions. Most have ensured that SEN is a central priority within the ALCs' action plans. It is clear that the creation of sub-groups to progress SEN work has been an effective strategy in contributing to the development of more vocational learning pathways for learners.

5.2 The ALCs would benefit from planning more strategically and corporately to support pupils with SEN and to embed the benefits emerging from the SEN work to date. For example, not all of the ALCs have SEN sub groups; the evidence suggests this is an effective approach to sharing resources and skills and extending the range and level of courses to suit pupils who have SEN.

5.3 Given the funding concerns related to ALCs, all of the ALCs need to draw on the lessons learned from current practice and improve further the shared responsibility of meeting the needs of a wider range of pupils who have learning difficulties. This action needs to address the issues raised by a number of principals, of transport costs and increased examination fees as more courses are available. The staffing implications, as new learning pathways and vocational courses are created, are a further challenge for the schools. Sharing resources across schools may help address these issues.

5.4 While the majority of special schools welcome the opportunity to participate actively in the ALCs, a small number expressed the view that a specific learning community for special schools would be appropriate. The findings of this survey, however, indicate a strong belief from a majority of the schools, that this action would be unhelpful and do little to promote inclusive working. The majority of schools support the ALC fully and consider that a sub group for SEN within each ALC, with additional contingency funding, is the best way forward for all. This report endorses this view.

6. Conclusion

6.1 This report recognises the positive development of ALCs and the growing impact of the work of special schools in raising awareness of, and supporting, action to meet the EF requirements. The report endorses the continued focus on SEN within ALCs.

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