

Joint Inspection by

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate – Republic of Ireland
Education and Training Inspectorate – Northern Ireland

Report of an Inspection of Middletown Centre for Autism



A N ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*

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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

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Arising from the Good Friday Agreement, a Special Education Co-ordination Group, comprising representatives of the Departments of Education, North and South, was established. Both Departments subsequently set up two parallel groups to examine provision relating to autism. An officer of the respective Departments in each jurisdiction was a member of both Task Forces. The resulting reports, since their publication in 2001-02, have informed policy for special educational needs as set out in legislation in each jurisdiction and ensured extensive strategic and practical changes to address effectively the needs of young people with an autism spectrum disorder.

1.2 The creation of the Middletown Centre for Autism (Centre) in 2007 reflects the continued commitment by both Departments of Education to the development of services and, particularly, for those young people with more complex and long term needs. Funding is equally provided by the two Departments of Education to support the development of provision for young people with an autism spectrum disorder by providing specialist support and services not currently available to the education sector in either jurisdiction. To date, the intensive school-based services, and to a lesser extent services for professionals, have only been accessed in Northern Ireland.

1.3 This report sets out the findings of an evaluation of the services provided by the Centre. It examines the quality and extent of the provision, its impact and outcomes, parental appreciation, schools' and professionals' views and the overall effectiveness of the provision and their relation to autism service providers. The findings include a number of recommendations to the Centre and to the policy-makers of the Department of Education, Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills, Republic of Ireland.

1.4 The inspection was commissioned by both Departments of Education and was carried out by inspectors from both jurisdictions over the April-May 2012 period.

1.5 Since May 2009, the original service delivery model, including an onsite school, has been significantly adjusted to accommodate the resources available to the Centre, meet revised departmental objectives, including the postponement of the proposed school building and complement the significant investments and subsequent support provision of autism services in both jurisdictions over the last decade.

1.6 The Centre is currently providing the following services.

- Educational assessment and individual intervention for ten young people with complex needs in Northern Ireland and not in the Republic of Ireland.
- Accessible research support throughout Ireland.
- Training programmes for professionals throughout Ireland, with the majority occurring in Northern Ireland.
- Training programmes for parents throughout Ireland with the majority occurring in Republic of Ireland.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The evaluation of the services provided by the Centre focused on the quality of the current areas of provision. The inspection approach was discussed with the Chief Executive of the Centre and the Head of Corporate Services, the Directors of the Centre and explained to the staff in a pre-briefing meeting; account was taken of the self-evaluation proforma data completed by the Centre in preparation for the inspection.

2.2 The inspectors also paid attention to the views of parents and professionals who access or contribute to the Centre's services. In addition, the inspection included a scrutiny of the Centre's extensive teacher and pupil support material and a number of telephone and face-to-face interviews with relevant individuals and organisations. Visits to a sample of schools in Northern Ireland and observations of pupil support and training sessions were a central aspect of the approach. A short questionnaire survey was conducted to ascertain independently the views of participants about the courses.

3. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

The quality of the provision for educational assessment, training and research is outstanding.

Strengths

- The staff demonstrate that they have a high level of skill, knowledge and expertise across the spectrum of autism, particularly in the area of complex and challenging needs.
- The trans-disciplinary working approach to assessment, intervention and training, research and development is an innovative, child-centred, highly effective and collaborative working model.
- The training programmes for parents and professionals are helping significantly to raise the confidence and skills of parents and professionals to work more effectively with the young people on the autism spectrum.
- In Northern Ireland, the intensive support provided in school and at home for the young people with complex and challenging needs is meeting their needs appropriately: very positive outcomes are recorded in all cases.
- The work to date on research and information is developing the Centre's professional standing in the wider autism community within and beyond Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The effectiveness of leadership and management in securing improvements and developing the quality of the service provision is very good.

Strengths

- The leadership team which includes the Chief Executive, the Head of Corporate Services and Heads of Division, all lead and progress, with notable success, the key priorities identified in the Centre's action plan.

- The Board of Directors are highly supportive of the work of the Centre; they demonstrate a clear challenge function and passion to ensure the standards and quality of services are exemplary.
- The Centre's culture of self-evaluation is well-embedded and there are effective arrangements and policies in place for monitoring and evaluation, and informing improvement.
- The Centre deploys its financial resources appropriately making effective use of all available resources.
- The evidence presented highlights the excellent value for money of the provision, as benchmarked against similar support service provision, which equates to £25.00/€30 per unit cost for training and £9,000-£12,000 / €9,900-€13,200 approximately for the annual cost of individual multi- disciplinary support for each young person, their peers, families and school staff.

Areas for further development

Notwithstanding the Centre's high quality of leadership and management, the evidence indicates that there are five main challenges for the centre, which require the support of policy makers:

- to ensure greater access to the broader range of the Centre's services in the Republic of Ireland. To date, the engagement with services in the Republic of Ireland has been limited by a number of factors which this report addresses;
- to ensure the effective communication of the continuum of services available to support young people with autism and clarify the Centre's position within this action;
- to develop further the Centre's facilities and use of the extensive campus; for example, to include primary and post-primary classroom training facilities and consider the potential for social and recreational schemes to enable parents to network and provide additional support to one another and their families;
- to improve the use of information and communication technology to provide greater access for e-learning courses and access to courses which can be accredited; and
- to improve the arrangements for consulting and communicating with the health authorities in both jurisdictions in order to ensure better collaborative and strategic cohesion and efficiencies of service provision.

Overall

In the work inspected, the quality of the provision is evaluated by the inspectors as outstanding. The Centre is meeting very effectively the needs of the young people, their peers, parents and professionals and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained improvement.

4. THE FINDINGS IN DETAIL

4.1 Over the period December 2007-March 2012, some 4,719 parents from both jurisdictions and 6,527 professionals have accessed Middletown training with over 95% indicating that the training was both informative and of practical use.

4.2 The questionnaire survey of participants, undertaken as part of the inspection, reveals an overwhelmingly positive feedback indicating the participants' endorsement of the training provided and the beneficial impact on their capacity to interact and/or work with the young people.

4.3 The data shows that demands for training and advice are growing especially from special needs assistants and health professionals, particularly in the Republic of Ireland; enabling the Centre to increase the numbers accessing training would address this demand.

4.4 Among the achievements found to date are the positive and lasting outcomes achieved by the young people from Northern Ireland, who were referred with significant challenging behaviour and complex needs. The inspectors observed at first hand, and read further examples, of young people settling in class, working with independence and interest, and noted the positive impact on peers as anxiety levels were reduced. The keystone of the intervention is that it is solely child-centred and addresses the observed and assessed unique needs of the young person and any variation which occurs over time and across school and home settings. A range of evidence-based autism-specific approaches are used; the trans-disciplinary model of working is a noteworthy feature and one which is in demand by schools.

4.5 The research publications launched by the Centre are informative and practical and are developed in response to requests from parents and professionals. There is, however, the need to develop further the research approach to focus more purposefully on the collation and analysis of data arising from the practice in both jurisdictions. This action would inform future planning, help to improve classroom practices, provide leading evidence of the effectiveness of the model of intervention and enable a database of information for both Departments of Education to access and use for strategic planning and policy advice.

4.6 The inspection findings identify a number of further aspects of the provision which the Centre should take forward within its action plans for 2012-2014.

These include the following:

- to continue to strengthen the existing service structure and trans-disciplinary approach to embed the specialist school-based support as a second tier support to front line services, particularly in the Republic of Ireland;
- to develop the positive links established with recognised autism experts who are helping the Centre to develop its research profile and wider standing;
- to continue to work with Special Education Support Service and other professional groups in the Republic of Ireland, to seek ways, perhaps through the establishment of a steering group representing both Departments of Education, to make optimal use of each others resources;

- to give consideration to developing the Centre's accreditation and recognition to participants achieving agreed practical skills and standards, and to continue to work with third level organisations to inform their courses and levels of accreditation; and
- to extend, within the joint business planning and available resources of both jurisdictions, the training and advisory support to more young people, their peers, parents and relevant professionals by building on the experience gained to date and through further research analysis of the impact of the trans-disciplinary model.

4.7 It is also evident from the findings that a number of additional changes need to be made.

These include:

- the need for greater clarity about the role of the Centre and by implication, securing the resources necessary for the impact of the services; and
- the location of a classroom, for primary and post primary training, to enhance the quality of the training and enable practical skills development to be filmed and accessed online.

4.8 In light of the findings, the Centre should develop its capacity to celebrate its successes to the wider education community. A steering group, representing policymakers from both Departments of Education, is suggested to advise and give support to the Centre's decisions in achieving the actions identified in this report.

5. THE OVERALL CONCLUSION

In the work inspected, the quality of the provision is evaluated by the inspectors as outstanding. The Centre is meeting very effectively the needs of the young people, their peers, parents and professionals and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained improvement.

5.1 Meeting the needs of young people with autism and significant complex and challenging needs requires high levels of skill and sensitivity from professionals working together to overcome them. The overall findings of this report show a very encouraging picture with parents and professionals rating the services they receive from the Centre as excellent. The integrated model of support is both unique and effective. The report has found numerous examples of outstanding support to young people, schools, parents and other professionals and organisations.

5.2 The key implications of the findings is that the development of the Centre's services should focus on maintaining the present services but, also, on:

- the need to develop more strategically the specialist provision and services so that they are available to schools and professionals in the Republic of Ireland;
- the need to ensure that the highly individualised support to young people is expanded and the outcomes analysed objectively within the research remit to inform practice and provide practical guidance to parents and professionals;

- the need to improve the teaching and training support by creating a training and teaching classroom facility, for primary and post-primary use, and improve the extent and potential of ICT within this facility which parents and professionals can access at a distance; and
- the need to ensure that the Centre progresses its academic pathways and links with university and further education institutions and develops its capacity to offer professional accreditation to those completing relevant training to an acquired standard.

5.3 To ensure optimal benefits and efficiencies of services in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, such changes as already suggested may best be facilitated by the creation of a steering group, with a holistic view of the wider special needs area, whose task it should be to give objective advice on current and future provision.

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