

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) Phase Report

September 2018 – December 2020



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Foreword

The last year has brought challenges to education and training in Northern Ireland unlike anything we could have imagined. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) along with many others, had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, including pausing inspection indefinitely.

Successful responses to the pandemic both, here and across the world have required understanding, adaptable and flexible leadership, underpinned by technological creativity; testing to the extreme the very attributes our education and training curricula endeavour to foster. Personal resilience is at a premium.

Maintaining operational integrity within and across the education and training system, continues to be a demanding, and increasingly exhausting undertaking for individuals and organisations. The long held ambition of providing access to education online had to be put in place virtually overnight.

Since March 2020, inspectors have been focusing largely on supporting leaders and practitioners to provide continuity of learning for children and young people and to support their wellbeing. Inspectors have shared their expertise and worked collaboratively with other key education and training stakeholders, to develop advice and guidance for a range of sectors.

This report is one of a series of seven individual reports (for Pre-school; Primary; Post-primary; Special; EOTAS; Youth; and Further Education and Work-based learning) covering the period September 2018 to December 2020, replacing the previous biennial Chief Inspector's Report.

This series of reports sets out: to help to promote improvement in the interests of all learners; to identify, affirm, and share evidence of effective learning, so that all learners can benefit; and to provide a basis to continue the professional educational discourse between inspectors and educators, for the benefit of all children and young people.

The reports are intended to stimulate debate and discussion on what we are discovering about the nature of effective learning and teaching, that can not only support a swifter recovery but that can influence and shape the future of education in Northern Ireland.

The immediate future continues to be uncertain, but I feel privileged to lead ETI, in continuing to contribute our impartial and objective analysis, evaluation and expertise to the collective work of addressing the challenges facing the education and training system in Northern Ireland.

These reports mark a change of direction and a fresh start to our organisation and our work. I welcome your thoughts and contributions as to how we can continue to support learners and educators to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing and unforeseen circumstances in the future through capturing and building on the experiences of educators before and during the pandemic.



Faustina Graham

Faustina Graham
Chief Inspector

Inspection Findings: September 2018 - March 2020¹

Context

EOTAS is an educational provision for pupils with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs who cannot sustain their placement within a mainstream school without significant levels of support. EOTAS centres aim to work in partnership with referring schools, with pupils attending the centre for part of the week and their mainstream school the other days for an agreed period. The provision aims to facilitate the reintegration of pupils into an appropriate mainstream school as soon as possible. It is not a duplication of mainstream education nor an alternative to school-based education. EOTAS also covers the provision of suitable education for pupils whose longer-term illnesses may prevent attendance at school and for pupils who have been expelled from mainstream school to access learning until they either return to mainstream or reach compulsory school leaving age. Some centres also provide outreach support for pupils in mainstream schools to prevent disengagement and to support reintegration.

This first section draws on EOTAS inspections carried out between September 2018 and March 2020 as well as district inspector knowledge of all EOTAS centres. During most of reporting period to March 2020, inspection work continued, although EOTAS centre inspections were impacted to varying degrees by action short of strike. However, all EOTAS centre leaders, as well as Education Authority (EA) advisers, co-operated with inspections in relation to safeguarding responsibilities and, in almost all cases, with the wider aspects of leadership, management, and quality of provision, including the outcomes for the pupils.

Effective practice

In almost one-quarter of the centres inspected, during the period from September 2018 to March 2020, pupil attendance improved over the time of their placement compared with their attendance when at school.

The primary and key stage (KS) 3 partnerships and the outreach support service are supporting those pupils effectively to maintain their place in their referring school.

In the one EOTAS centre, where a full inspection was conducted, the centre was evaluated as having a high level of capacity for sustained improvement. In this centre, pupils learn to interact confidently and respectfully with staff and one another. Daily routines and application of nurturing principles, such as through breakfast arrangements, are improving well the pupils' social and life skills. In discussions with pupils, they highlight their appreciation for reward systems, small teaching groups and support they receive from their EOTAS link teacher.

¹ This report parallels a review, carried out by the ETI for the Department of Education (DE) between September 2019 and May 2020, into the implementation of EOTAS provision as set out in DE Circular 2014/24, the first such review since the EOTAS Circular was effected in 2015.

In centres which provide a therapeutic curriculum², pupils acquire skills to regulate their own behaviours and manage their emotions more effectively. In the more effective practice, observed in a small number of centres, teaching and non-teaching staff contribute effectively to high quality and therapeutic learning experiences which benefit the pupils.

Challenges

EOTAS centres face challenges; these were explored in more detail in a recent review undertaken by ETI for the Department of Education (DE) of the EOTAS provision. In the reporting period, the challenges faced by EOTAS centres include:

- limited access to educational psychology expertise and advice, which delays the assessment of pupils with complex needs;
- insufficient governance arrangements;
- variation in the quality of provision resulting in outcomes for pupils, well below their ability;
- shortcomings in partnerships with mainstream schools including very limited reintegration of KS4 pupils back to their referring school;
- limitations in key data about attendance, assessment and accreditation; and
- poor quality accommodation which does not reflect the same standards for access, security and health and safety required of school buildings.

Safeguarding

At the time of inspection, arrangements for safeguarding in most EOTAS centres reflected or reflected broadly, guidance from DE. In three centres, safeguarding provision was evaluated as being unsatisfactory. The ETI returned to those centres within six weeks to re-evaluate the impact of required improvements. One centre did not comply with DE EOTAS guidance 2014/24 in relation to standards of accommodation, lack of a safeguarding team and policy deficiencies and required a further two safeguarding follow-up inspections. Subsequently, all issues reported were addressed and in all three centres safeguarding improved to reflect broadly guidance issued by DE.

² A therapeutic curriculum includes support strategies, programmes and therapies focused on helping pupils with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs overcome barriers to their learning.

Lessons learned March - June 2020

In the period March to June 2020, inspectors engaged with professional colleagues, who direct, manage and make provision for children and young people other than at school, and identified the trends described below.

Partnership with parents/carers

At all times centre leaders seek to maintain contact with, and provide support for, the young people served by the centres. During lockdown it was common for daily phone contact to be established with parents/carers in response to individual parental needs. Centres prioritised those pupils and families who required a greater and more consistent degree of communication. Centre leaders reported that communication with parents/carers improved during lockdown as staff were providing advice and support, often beyond normal working hours, to help parents/carers manage their child's emotional and behavioural needs, especially for those with acute social anxiety issues and who appreciated being at home.

One centre reported, for example, that all 234 pupils receiving centre and outreach support were contacted weekly, and over 3000 physical and online contacts were logged from March to June 2020. Importantly, links were maintained with the carers of children looked-after, and those of key workers. In another centre, a pupil was placed in residential care during lockdown and staff arranged a virtual tour of the residence and sent photos and decorations to be placed in the pupil's bedroom to ease the transition.

Learning support is provided remotely

The EA EOTAS Exceptional Teaching Arrangements Service facilitated bi-weekly virtual meetings with managers³ and highlighted issues experienced by vulnerable pupils, addressing matters such as a lack of access to technology where it inhibited engagement in remote learning.

EOTAS staff reported that learning support packs were provided to pupils and/or online learning provision was developed. Centres reported that when work was focused on supporting pupils' needs for emotional, social and physical wellbeing, they engaged with pupils through for example, phone calls, home doorstep visits, providing healthy-eating recipes to encourage pupils and their parents/carers to cook together, and promoting games and activities which could be played outdoors to aid fitness. Some pupils took photos of their successes and shared these with their teachers.

³ In EOTAS centres, EA advisers are also managers of the centres.

To avoid duplication and ensure progression, one centre established a shared online area for staff resources and signposted staff and parents/carers to online training about resilience and wellbeing.

Effective communication between centre and home

The centre is situated in a former primary school in a rural area with children travelling to the centre from a wide geographical area. The centre provides for children from KS1 and 2 with complex, social, emotional and behavioural needs through both centre-based and outreach support. The children attend the centre on a part-time basis, with the remainder of time spent in their own school, for a cycle of support of up to 12 weeks, depending on need and progress.

The centre develops a robust “keep in touch” plan which included Google Classroom links for children and their parents/carers, weekly contact from the link member of staff, weekly emails to parents/carers and the children, weekly contact from the centre manager, the establishment of a parent/carer support group, birthday cards to the children and work packs provided to the children.

Communication with support agencies was maintained through, for example, weekly discussions in relation to children looked-after. Parents/carers received an online media presentation on rules, routines and boundaries to support learning and behaviour at home. Additional presentations were developed by the centre staff to support delivery of training for teachers in their referring schools which included an area, established within Google Classroom, for staff to share resources.

A centre newsletter issued once a week to pupils, parents/carers and the referring schools and a regional newsletter issued bi-monthly. Support for emotional wellbeing was prioritised through online yoga links, film clubs, a weekly dance challenge, video links to mindfulness strategies and Easter activity packs which included seeds to plant in the garden.

Importantly, the newsletter incorporated transition resources, and recorded and reported the achievements of families and referring schools during the period of remote learning. The children, parents/carers, referring schools and support services attended an online celebration event.

Going forward, to provide stability and to benefit the pupils, the centre intends to maintain its success in the use of Google Classroom in the new academic year, with three virtual classrooms for pupils, for parents/carers and for centre staff.

Support is extended in a range of creative ways

During the period of lockdown, centre leaders reported inconsistent communication, in particular for KS4 pupils, from their mainstream school. Not all pupils attending EOTAS provision were enabled to access the online learning provision from their referring school.

From late April onwards, staff responded to the pupils' frustration with remote learning by facilitating learning, in-centre, in one-to-one settings or small groups. Prior to doing so, individual risk assessments were carried out and pupils were informed of the changes to practical arrangements in teaching and learning within the centre.

Centres were creative in celebrating the achievements of those senior pupils who were due to leave the centre in June. Virtual celebration days were arranged; class photos and memory books were distributed. Centres have been tracking the destinations of leaver groups and one centre reported providing continued phone support to encourage pupils to persist with their new training placements.

A small number of centre leaders used the period of lockdown to make improvements to the physical learning environment through the development of, for example, outdoor play areas, an outdoor classroom, sensory rooms and sensory walks in order to support more effectively the pupils' emotional needs when they returned to the centre.

Centres plan induction for the new school year

In June, to support new pupils and parents/carers referred to the centre for the next school year, in the more effective practice reported, EOTAS centres compiled induction packs, created virtual centre tours and provided online introductions to staff. Unable to meet with referring schools to plan the educational objectives for the pupils, digital student files were created to transfer information and virtual meetings were arranged. A small number of centre leaders reported that the engagement of referring schools was better than in previous years, as travel to the centre by school staff was not required. Going forward, the use of virtual meetings with pupils' referring schools should help enable better partnership between centres and schools.

Supporting pupils' wellbeing

This centre provides a KS3 partnership programme with mainstream schools. For fifteen weeks, pupils spend three days of the week in the centre to address the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties they experience, with the remaining time spent in their own schools. Approximately half way through the intervention, the pattern of attendance is reversed, with pupils attending their schools for three days a week and the centre for two.

When the centre closed, the staff had only begun to work with a new cohort of pupils. The centre leader prioritised building relationships with these pupils and their parents/carers through regular phone contact, delivering food/clothes parcels and arranging socially-distanced outdoor meetings to discuss pupil and parent/carer needs.

In order to support pupils with their learning, the staff prepared learning support packs across a variety of subject areas and made online learning provision for pupils. Despite the efforts of staff, pupils have limited technology access for online learning. Feedback from parents/carers highlight that academic work caused conflict and arguments at home. Responding to an escalation of negative behaviour and emotions at home, the centre prioritised the emotional and physical wellbeing needs of the pupils and their parents/carers. Staff focused on guiding pupils to tasks which supported self-regulation, for example art, cookery and outdoor activities.

A small number of referring schools maintained contact with the centre about pupils. In other cases the centre staff initiated contact with the referring schools to update them about their pupil's progress, engagement in learning and pastoral needs. Link teachers remained in weekly contact with both their centre and outreach pupils. Importantly, the centre staff maintained contact and support with pupils and their families during the summer period.

The strength of the centre's response lies in the strong links with the community, with for example, a small number of their pupils making over 500 face shields, distributing food hampers through the local football clubs, referring pupils to the youth service 'Stay Connected' programme, maintaining contact with social services and the PSNI, and maintaining a daily review of vulnerable children. Importantly, the centre manager attended Education Authority panels to discuss the needs of vulnerable children in the centre and pupils across the service for whom intervention or referral would be required.

Lessons learned during September - December 2020

Since education restart in September 2020 the EOTAS centres overall are, generally, continuing to cope well and are addressing challenges positively, and centre leaders report their appreciation of support from EA advisers.

Centres are keeping pupils safe, helping them to settle and to progress

Centres complete risk assessments and have developed systems to keep pupils and staff safe – one-way systems, sanitising stations, bubble arrangements (which are, in their turn, improving behaviour, although bubbles may also be limiting opportunities for pupils to develop social interaction skills). Centres are thinking creatively to deliver nurture breakfasts safely and, for the most part, pupils are responding well.

Some centres report that while some pupils returning are suffering social anxiety, others are more settled than had been expected. Where pupils are more settled, staff put this down to the effectiveness of the provision which they have tailored to focus on their welfare.

Making contact with parents/carers has improved gradually as the parents/carers benefit from increased personal contact and support from the centres. In particular, they welcome positive feedback about their child's progress.

Tracking pupils' progress across the centre, school and home

In one example, a centre encourages all pupils to use a digital tablet application across the centre, referring school and at home, to reflect on learning and behaviour. The application uses key words to enable pupils to pinpoint the causes and consequences of their behaviour and identify ways to regulate their behaviour in the future. This application enables the centre to track pupils' progress across the centre, school and home.

Baseline assessments are being completed which inform individualised curriculum delivery and, following restart, a small number of post-primary schools have contacted EOTAS centres to provide access to the curriculum at KS4.

Staff value professional learning

Centres report that there is beneficial professional learning for staff, including participation in courses on trauma-informed practice, emotional health and wellbeing and blended learning. In contrast, some centre leaders comment on the need for more staff professional learning opportunities to disseminate effective practice across EOTAS centres.

Staff prioritise a creative therapeutic curriculum to promote wellbeing

EOTAS staff demonstrate energy and commitment to meet the needs of vulnerable pupils. In the most effective practice, staff foster a positive sense of togetherness with their pupils, building on trust and mutual respect. Staff report that effective therapies include: mindfulness; complementary therapies; outdoor learning which links horticulture to healthy eating, promotes physical health, enables multi-sensory engagements and provides outdoor safe spaces to enable pupils to regulate anxiety; and supporting pupils to approach issues with growth mind-sets and improving their communication skills. Importantly, some centres are developing peer education to promote pupils' independence in emotional self-regulation. Pupils learn to affirm each other positively and challenge inappropriate comments, including sectarianism, by reflecting on the impact of words in a shared classroom with others from different backgrounds.

EOTAS outreach support responds proactively to meet needs identified in mainstream schools.

For example, a centre focused on developing a year nine nurture group meeting once a week to provide preventative therapeutic work at KS3 through practical engagement with Home Economics, Art Therapy and Games with Purpose. Another centre works with EA staff and mainstream schools to develop resources on helping pupils to understand brain responses, making wise choices and using their voice appropriately in order to flourish in the world around them.

Pupils benefit from the role of the Youth Service in EOTAS

Centre leaders report the benefits of partnership with the Youth Service and in particular, through the expertise and additional support of youth workers and the programmes delivered. Youth workers provide a wide range of programmes such as Facilitating Life and Resilience Education⁴, Circle of Courage⁵, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, the Creative Arts and

⁴ FLARE Facilitating Life and Resilience Education is part of the Education Authority's Youth Service and was developed in partnership with the Public Health Agency. The programme supports young people 11-25 years promoting positive mental health.

⁵ The Circle of Courage model promotes the positive development of Attachment, Achievement, Autonomy and Altruism as four dimensions inextricably intertwined.

Digital Innovators Programme⁶, the Prince's Trust qualifications, anger management training and individual mentoring. Centres value the impact of their work on pupils' social skills, confidence, self-esteem and their ability to self-regulate their emotions in different contexts.

The pandemic creates challenges and pressures for leaders, staff and pupils

The demand on centre leaders to manage the centre, teach, provide direction to staff on pupil needs and engage with service agencies is significant. Furthermore, the small numbers of staff in centres can mean that when a number of staff need to self-isolate, the whole centre has to close.

A number of centres report non-attendance for a small number of pupils with complex needs, including severe anxiety, and for those whose parent/carer is shielding. Communication with some families remains a challenge where there are ongoing health and wellbeing issues.

Demand for support services and for enhanced resources

Centre and outreach services have been effective in varying their practices to best meet the needs of pupils, whilst maintaining social distancing, even though numbers of pupils receiving support at any one time have to be reduced slightly in the circumstances. However, experience is inconsistent, with a shortfall in educational psychology support across centres, and with no access to youth work support in others, which impacts negatively on the quality of interventions, especially for those pupils who are extremely vulnerable. Centre leaders also report that intervention from other services such as for counselling, careers guidance and education welfare is often by phone call or online, which is less effective in engaging pupils, particularly where a prior relationship has not first been developed.

The continued securing of digital devices should support online learning over time. There remain, however, inconsistencies in access for pupils of the online provision from their referring schools. Furthermore, there are varying degrees of staff confidence and competence in using digital technology to deliver lessons remotely, re-engage pupils in their learning and develop pupils' digital and online learning skills.

Considerations for EOTAS centres going forward

In responding to the challenges of the Covid-19 virus pandemic centre leaders have responded well. Some important lessons have been learnt and staff have confidently and creatively sought to develop solutions for disadvantaged and challenging pupils, from which mainstream schools could learn, in helping settle pupils and prepare them for learning. Centre leaders say that they have benefited from professional learning, built capacity and put timely training into practice. In summary, there is evidently strength and effectiveness, especially in the partnership programmes, in outreach services and in primary and KS3 provision.

⁶ This programme is run by the EA Youth Service Creative Arts and Digital Innovation Team providing creative opportunities in filmmaking, photography, graphic design, events planning and sound production.

In working with EOTAS centres in recent months, EOTAS district inspectors have identified a number of key considerations, going forward, including how to:

- develop ways in which the pupils' views can help to shape, refine and improve the EOTAS provision;
- continue to build the EOTAS partnership with mainstream schools, especially at KS4 where there remains significant variation in the quality of engagement by referring schools;
- develop the capacity and opportunity for pupils to access and benefit from online provision both from their referring schools and their EOTAS centres; and
- improve access to quality professional learning for EOTAS staff, including the sharing of effective practices across centres, referring schools and with parents/carers using digital technology as appropriate.

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