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# CSSC response to Education Authority pre-publication consultation on the Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools – Pilot

**Controlled Schools:**

* Abbey Community College
* Ballycastle High School
* Dunclug College
* Fort Hill Integrated College
* Fort Hill Integrated Primary School
* Lisneal College
* Seaview PS

**Catholic Maintained Schools**:

* Cross and Passion College
* Good Shepherd Primary School
* Holy Evangelists’ Primary School

**Background**

The Education Authority launched a public consultation in October 2020 on the proposed future educational provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) across special schools and specialist provisions in mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. CSSC has submitted a response to both consultations. The consultation on the proposed framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools outlined the aims and objectives of the Education Authority in seeking to establish more specialist provision in mainstream schools and outlined the need to be able to establish a more agile process to establish, close or change specialist provision in mainstream schools without recourse to the current process which requires the publication of a Development Proposal. The Education Authority’s intention was for the pilot to run in parallel with the DE and EA’s consultations on the draft SEN Regulations/Code of Practice and area planning frameworks respectively. It was envisaged that, by doing so, the findings of the pilot would feed into both consultations and collectively the information gathered from stakeholders would inform a new process for the approval and implementation of these provisions. CSSC’s response to the Education Authority’s proposed framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools offered comment on the pilot process noting agreement with the rationale for the pilot and the criteria used by EA to identify schools for the pilot. EA has subsequently received notification from DE that arrangements for each pilot school must be the subject of a pre-publication consultation.

CSSC has sought the views of the leaders of all controlled schools involved in the pilot process. To date direct contact has been made with 5 of the 7 controlled schools.

**Summary of Key Issues**

The objectives of the Education Authority’s pilot are outlined as follows: -

* To develop a new more streamlined and efficient process to establish, close or change specialist provision in mainstream schools.
* To ensure that the new process provides opportunity for interested parties to have their views considered before final decisions are taken.
* To define how the process will operate in practice including linkages with publication of an annual published plan of arrangements for SEN (2016 SEND Act refers).
* To develop recommendations for the Minister to consider based on a report on the pilot outcomes

The Education Authority identified schools for the pilot process where: -

* existing temporary provisions had been established for more than four years, with proven demand and delivery of a high quality specialist provision in a mainstream setting;
* major capital announcements, with existing provision, which provide the opportunity for enhanced provision in modern purpose-built accommodation; and
* major capital announcements, without existing provision, where there is identified local need.

The case for change provides the following detail regarding the establishment of the specialist provision.

**Pupil Numbers** - Specialist provision classes will have fewer pupil numbers than a mainstream class with a higher level of adult support. The specialist provision (Learning) will provide places for up to 12 pupils per class and the specialist provision (Autism) up to eight pupils per class.

**Staffing / Management** - The Board of Governors, supported by the Education Authority, assume governance of the specialist provision with the daily running and management being the responsibility of the school principal. The staff will be funded by the Education Authority and managed by the school with recruitment fulfilled in line with the normal school recruitment process. The profile of the group of children within the provision will determine the level of staffing. However, generally, when operating at full capacity, the specialist provision (Learning) will be staffed with one teacher and one classroom assistant and the specialist provision (Autism) will be staffed with one teacher and two classroom assistants.

**Funding** – Teaching and non-teaching staff will be funded by the Education Authority and an annual payment of £3,000 per class will be allocated through the LMS budget.

**Support** - The school will have access to a range of support services within the Education Authority.

The table below indicates what has been proposed for each of the seven controlled schools and includes details of the proposed implementation plan.

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| **School** | **Pilot Proposal** | **Current Specialist Provision** | **Proposed Implementation Plan.** |
| Abbey Community College | 2xAutism  Key Stages 3 and 4 | School already has two Learning Support Centres. Temporary resource provision has created 4 places in the LSC for pupils with Autism. | Pilot provision will be phased into current school building, however design of new building is future proofed to ensure that there are options to commence detailed design or to include the new provision in the overall build. |
| Ballycastle High School | 1xLearning and 1xAutism  Key Stages 3 and 4. | No current provision. Proposals linked to the establishment of the Ballycastle Shared Campus - Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College, has approval for a new build shared campus. | The Education Authority will establish a four class specialist provision in the new shared campus in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The implementation of this specialist provision will follow completion of the new Shared Campus capital build. |
| Dunclug College | 1xLearning and 1xAutism.  Key Stages 3 and 4 | The proposed Autism class already operational. | Specialist provision, will be phased into the current school building due to limitations in respect of spare accommodation. The design of the new school building is future proofed to ensure that there are options to commence detailed design or to include the new provision in the overall build. |
| Fort Hill Integrated College | 2xLearning and 2xAutism.  Key Stages 3 and 4 | School has an established temporary four class Social Communication provision for Key Stages 3 and 4. | The EA is changing existing provision as set out in the second column. |
| Fort Hill Integrated Primary School | 2xLearning and 2xAutism  Foundation, Key Stages 1 and 2 | One of the proposed Autism classes is already established with 3 pupils in attendance and is currently staffed by one teacher and one Classroom Assistant. | School has approval for a new build. The proposed specialist provision will initially be established in the current school building, on a phased basis, with the four class provision included in the new build school. |
| Lisneal College | 2xAutism  Key Stages 3 and 4 | School has an approved two class Specialist Provision (Learning) classes and an established temporary Specialist Provision (Autism) class. | The Education Authority will expand on current provision with the establishment of two Autism classes across Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. |
| Seaview Primary School | 2xLearning and 2xAutism  Foundation, Key Stages 1 and 2. | School has one Specialist Provision (Autism) class which was established on a temporary basis in September 2020.  Seaview PS has approval for a new build school, | The four class specialist provision will initially be established in the current school building, on a phased basis, with the four class provision included in the new build. |

The Education Authority has developed criteria for the establishment of specialist provision which build upon the criteria identified in the Sustainable Schools Policy. Accommodation is considered alongside accessibility and a further criterion - Clear Commitment to Inclusion is considered.

**Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools Criteria**

• Quality Educational Experience

• Strong Leadership and Management

• Accessibility and Accommodation

• Clear Commitment to Inclusion

• Strong links with the community

• Stable enrolment trends

Each case for change includes an assessment of the school against the enhanced criteria developed by EA to assess schools for which specialist provision will be established.

**Draft Response**

CSSC notes the Education Authority’s (EA) pre-publication consultations outlining proposals which will lead to the establishment of specialist provision in ten mainstream schools, which include four primary schools and six post-primary schools. CSSC understands that these proposals form the basis of a pilot relating to the EA’s public consultation launched in October 2020 on the proposed future educational provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) across special schools and specialist provisions in mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. CSSC has submitted a response to both the consultation on the draft area planning framework for special schools and the draft framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools, the latter including detail of the pilot process and the 10 named pilot schools. CSSC understands that the publication of a draft case for change specific for each of the pilot schools is in accordance with the Education Authority’s statutory requirement under Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, to seek the views of those most directly affected by the proposed changes at local level. CSSC notes that 7 of the pilot schools are controlled schools and welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals specific to controlled schools.

CSSC agrees with the rationale for the pilot and agrees that the statutory Development Proposal process does not have sufficient flexibility to be responsive to the needs presenting. A more agile process is required to enable EA to provide pupils and parents with a greater level of equity in the availability of specialist provision. CSSC notes that the EA is seeking to deliver this greater accessibility within the context of the challenge of a changing and more complex profile of special educational needs.

CSSC agrees with the rationale and objectives of the proposals for all controlled schools both primary and post-primary and notes that what is proposed for formal approval is specific to each school. For some schools the specialist provision is being established for the first time while in others it is being changed or expanded. CSSC is in favour of the development of this approach and understands the important contribution that specialist provision in mainstream schools will make to addressing regional inconsistencies in respect of the provision available in each Local Government District. CSSC notes that the EA is seeking to provide pupils and parents with a greater level of equity in the availability of specialist provision in mainstream schools across the region. One of the pilot schools referred to the benefit that the specialist provision is already having on providing greater access to inclusive educational opportunities for pupils with a statement of special educational needs in their local area and referred to how the children from one family are now all able to attend the same school because their sibling’s needs can be met in the specialist provision that is very much a part of the school. The child’s ability to enter the school gates along with his siblings, wearing the same school uniform, is a delightful illustration of inclusion.

CSSC notes that one of the pilot’s objectives is to define how the process will operate in practice including linkages with the publication of an annual published plan of arrangements for SEN. CSSC understands that this annual plan of arrangements will include reference to training for specialist provision. CSSC in its response to the draft framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools emphasised the need for training to be developed that is specific to the type of specialist provision facilitated by the school and informed by the views of practitioners in relation to the needs of the children attending. One pilot school referred to the need for first aid training and the benefits of access to a menu of the training delivered by the EA’s pupil support services, Health and Social Care trusts as well as reputable organisations such as Middletown Centre for Autism.

The controlled schools in the pilot have a clear commitment to inclusion and in our engagement they emphasised the importance of the whole school community working to ensure effective inclusion. CSSC understands that the language of inclusion needs to permeate the school’s ethos and all staff, teaching and non-teaching need to have a knowledge and understanding of the specialist provision and how they can contribute to the school’s efforts to promote inclusion. Controlled school Principals have emphasised the need for staff in the mainstream classes to be able to avail of the same training as staff in the specialist provision classes. CSSC understands that the training model, in order to ensure the effective and efficient use of resources in a challenging financial climate, often relies on a designated member of staff such as the Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) disseminating the training to staff. The role of the LSC is crucial to the success of specialist provision and so it is essential that this role is sufficiently resourced so that the LSC has the time to support pupils with SEN but is also able to co-ordinate the efforts of the whole staff team to respond to the needs of the child. The principal of a controlled post-primary school spoke of the crucial role played by the LSC in ensuring that the content of each child’s Personal Learning Plan is known to members of staff thereby providing them with the appropriate knowledge and understanding to support the effective inclusion of the child who attends the specialist provision but who will also attend the school’s mainstream classes, participate in whole school events and extra-curricular activities organised by school. Another Principal spoke of the need for school leaders and LSCs to be supported in facilitating discussions with the whole staff team about the roles and responsibilities of each member of staff in relation to supporting the inclusion of pupils with SEN.

The leaders of some controlled schools expressed concern about the potential for the EA to prioritise the placement of a child with SEN who is not known to the school over a placement of a child with SEN who is currently accommodated at the school and whom the school feels would benefit from attending the school’s specialist provision. Constructive engagement with school principals in the decision making processes regarding pupil placement is crucial

Pilot schools in preparing to meet the needs of pupils who will attend the school’s specialist provision have liaised with other schools to ensure that they are considering the advice of practitioners and spoke highly of the opportunity to engage in professional discussions with staff experienced in meeting the needs of children attending specialist provision. DE’s Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning refers to the need to build professional learning communities within education; to support closer collaboration between practitioners, schools and clusters and professional learning providers. CSSC believes that a resourced cluster is essential to allow practitioners to share effective practice and to avail collectively of the support of relevant external agencies to enhance practice and such views were voiced during consultation with pilot schools. In consideration of the expansion of specialist provision in mainstream schools CSSC believes that the staff of specialist provision classes should be able to engage in facilitated cluster meetings which support collaboration and professional discussions. CSSC, moreover, is of the view that consideration should to given as to how the expertise of staff within special schools can benefit and support the practice of staff supporting children with SEN in mainstream schools. These forums, if properly resourced could be a means of facilitating the development and dissemination of effective practice.

Controlled schools note the increasing complexity of need that some children with special educational needs are presenting with in mainstream schools and have referred to specific concerns in relation to the successful management of challenging behaviour. Some pilot schools referred to the desire to avail of training in the Team Teach model as a means of managing this behaviour. CSSC is informed that this accredited training is no longer available to mainstream schools and mainstream schools with specialist provision who would previously have had the required licenses to engage with the Team Teach techniques now report that they are unable to renew these licenses and are therefore unable to engage with the non-verbal de-escalation techniques which are sometimes required for the pupils’ and others’ protection. An evaluation of the Team Teach model, published in 2011 and authored by officers from the legacy South Eastern Education and Library Board, North Eastern Education and Library Board and the Southern Education and Library Board, while acknowledging that managing behaviour in school is an ongoing controversial issue, found that the quality of training was excellent and provided consistency and confidence for staff. If the Team Teach model is no longer considered appropriate as a means of positive behaviour management in specialist provisions which are a part of mainstream schools the Education Authority must engage constructively with the Principals of such provision to consult on suitable alternative interventions which will prevent harm and support the mental health and wellbeing of the pupil and others. Controlled schools report that safe handling training is not a suitable alternative and without accredited training staff faced with challenging behaviour lack confidence and feel vulnerable to litigious action should they intervene physically in any way.

CSSC is encouraged by the experience of some controlled schools in the pilot in relation to the support they have received from the Education Authority to ensure that their accommodation is appropriately resourced and this has included advice regarding adapted lighting, muted paint colours, carpet rather than wooden flooring, blinds to counteract bright sunlight, advice which has supported the school in ensuring a nurturing learning environment for their pupils. CSSC understands that some specialist provision is being gradually phased into schools’ current accommodation as they await new build accommodation. CSSC has been encouraged to hear that in such scenarios the EA has assessed the current accommodation and where required have revised the number of children who will be accommodated based on the school’s current capacity.

CSSC in its response to the draft framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools expressed agreement with the EA’s criteria that accommodation should be fit for purpose to enable specialist provision to be integral to the school. Some pilot schools have expressed concerns about the ability of their current accommodation to accommodate the specialist provision and CSSC understands that these concerns have been shared with EA officers. While committed to the pilot and accommodating specialist provision, one post-primary school noted that while possible in previous years to reassign classrooms to the specialist provision which the school already accommodates, this will become more difficult as the school continues to grow. While the Principal has been assured of the potential for a solution it is the Principal’s view that extra classrooms will be required and not short-term solutions. CSSC understands the importance of the physical environment to provide for a quality educational experience and it is therefore vital that in preparing for the EA’s annual plan of arrangements for SEN that the continued appropriateness of existing specialist provision is evaluated in addition to the EA’s assessment of the accommodation required for the establishment of new specialist provision. CSSC notes that for the pilot schools who have secured capital investment for a new build the design of the new school building will be future proofed to ensure that when appropriate there are options to commence detailed design or to include the new provision in the overall build. It is essential, going forward that consideration is given to the potential of incorporating specialist provision in the designs for all new builds so that the Education Authority can respond swiftly to identified local need for such provision.

Pilot schools are generally in favour of the arrangements for the staffing and management of specialist provision and one Principal spoke favourably of a recruitment process which had allowed the teacher and classroom assistant for specialist provision to be recruited in a timely manner therefore allowing the new staff adequate time to get to know other members of staff and to build relationships remotely with the children and their parents ahead of their physical attendance at the school’s specialist provision. Pilot schools were also encouraged by the enhanced pupil/teacher ratios and one primary school commented on the advantages of this in allowing staff to support children with SEN when they engage in outdoor play - public health restrictions permitting - with children from the mainstream classes. Some concerns were expressed, however, about perceived inflexibility in resourcing for specialist provision classes. CSSC understands that the specialist provision classes for Autism will be staffed by a teacher and 2 classroom assistants funded by the Education Authority. One post-primary controlled school questioned if the additional classroom assistant provision was always the most appropriate model for supporting the specialist provision for Autism and suggested that it would be more appropriate for the school to evaluate what provision would best support the needs of the pupils known to the school, additional adult assistance or diverting the resource attached to the classroom assistant to specific therapies or resources identified by the school. Another post-primary school noted that management of the Classroom assistant model can be very challenging in a post-primary context especially if the school is educating significant numbers of children with a statement of special educational needs for whom classroom assistant hours have been allocated. In some post-primary schools could be in a position of managing in excess of 50 Classroom Assistants as part of their staff team. CSSC endorses the view of leaders of controlled schools who have stressed that flexibility is required in how they provide for children with SEN. CSSC is supportive of effective practice in some settings which, with EA’s agreement and that of parents, have been able to divert the classroom assistant resource for a certain number of children to fund a single full-time specialist teacher - supported by one Classroom Assistant - who can deliver the NI curriculum within a small group setting. Settings which have implemented this model have reported improved outcomes for these pupils and believe it to be an effective alternative model to that of the adult assistance model. CSSC understands that the cost of classroom assistants has almost doubled since 2011/2012 and notes the Northern Ireland Audit Office’s recommendation that the Department and EA ‘assess the quality of SEN support provided in mainstream schools by formally evaluating it in terms of the progress made by children’ to allow resources to be focused on ‘types of support which maximise progress and improve outcomes.’ CSSC notes the DE/EA SEND Programme Board’s intention to progress a project which will consolidate the adult assistant employment model and seek to develop a consistent system for recruiting, providing appropriate professional development and deploying adult assistants across NI’s education settings. Consideration of the most effective training model for classroom assistants is crucial to ensure that the resource assigned to this type of support demonstrates value for money. Leaders of controlled schools believe that currently there is little training available for classroom assistants and a programme of ongoing training and development is essential. It is crucial that the views of practitioners are sought in any evaluation of SEN provision and CSSC welcomes the DE/EA SEND Programme Board’s intention to progress a project which considers school based innovations in supporting learning.

CSSC notes that the specialist provision to be established in each pilot school is focused solely on specialist provision for Learning and specialist provision for Autism. Controlled schools have commented that while the consultation document states the number and type of provision to be established at each setting it does not provide sufficient detail in relation to what is specifically being proposed for each key stage. CSSC is aware that in many schools the model is one of delivering specialist provision for Autism at Foundation and Key Stage 1 and specialist provision for Learning at Key Stage 2 while specialist provision for Autism is again a feature at Key Stage 3. Schools which currently have specialist provision for Autism from Foundation to Key Stage 2 commented on the significant advantages of this continuum of support for the child with autism. Greater clarity is needed for the rationale for a lack of specialist provision for Autism at Key Stage 2. CSSC is aware that the model for specialist provision for Autism will be kept under review by EA and would emphasise the importance of engaging with the views of practitioners in order to inform the establishment of effective practice.

CSSC is reassured that the implementation plans for the establishment/formal recognition/change and/or expansion of specialist provision emphasises a phased and managed process to ensure parental confidence and the appropriate professional development of staff. Pilot schools have spoken favourably of EA efforts to resource specialist provision in each setting and to adapt plans in accordance with schools’ current circumstances. It is crucial that the views of school leaders inform all plans in respect of the establishment of specialist provision in mainstream schools and that EA seeks practitioner views in relation to the resourcing of this provision on a regular basis to inform the training and interventions developed to meet the needs of children with SEN.

CSSC understands that this pre-publication consultation will allow those most directly affected to express their views in relation to the specific proposals for their school. CSSC notes that if approved, the new process of establishing, changing or expanding specialist provision in mainstream schools, will continue to afford those most directly affected by the proposals the opportunity to make their views known through consultation on an annual published plan of arrangements for SEN, in line with requirements under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) NI Act (2016). However, at this time it is unclear what the consultation arrangements will be for this published plan of arrangements. While CSSC believes that a more agile process is required to allow the EA to respond to identified need, where pre-publication consultation identifies significant issues for those most directly affected by the proposals, due consideration must be given to these concerns and the requirement for the publication of a Development Proposal considered.

CSSC welcomes the Education Authority’s stated intention to develop recommendations for the Minister to consider based on a report of the pilot outcomes.

CSSC is happy to discuss this response with the Education Authority.