

8 April 2022

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools Pilot 2**

CSSC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Education Authority's Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools: Pilot 2 proposals which seeks approval of temporary Specialist Provisions to Permanent Specialist Provisions. CSSC notes that the Pilot proposals relate to 89 historic specialist provisions within 58 schools and the creation of 41 additional pathways in these schools.

CSSC notes the publication of consultation documents specific to the each of the pilot schools and submits this response to be considered in the context of the proposals for specialist provisions which relate to the 24 controlled schools. CSSC has consulted with controlled schools to inform this response.

CSSC notes the October 2021 Ministerial endorsement of the Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools and the associated Specialist Provision in Mainstream Pilot which were the subject of public consultation in October 2020 and to which CSSC responded. CSSC understands that the ministerial endorsement allows for a more flexible and agile approach that will facilitate the establishment, closure or change of Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools without the need for the publication of a statutory Development Proposal. CSSC, understands the important contribution of specialist provision in mainstream schools and the need to address regional inconsistencies. The statutory Development Proposal process does not have sufficient flexibility to be responsive within the challenging context of a changing and more complex profile of special educational needs. CSSC notes that this approach is approved by the Minister in the absence of full implementation of the SEND Act (2016) and that Act's provision for an Annual Plan of Arrangements for SEND.

CSSC notes that within Pilot 2 each school proposal has an associated Consultation paper which outlines the proposal assessed against the Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools criteria and indicators approved in the Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools to confirm compliance and continued need.

CSSC notes that in addition to regularising the historic (temporary resource) provision at mainstream schools established without a Development Proposal prior to 2020/21 that the Pilot will:

- assess the provision put in place under EA's emergency response in 2020/21; and

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- bring forward proposals for 2022/23, if the SEND Act (NI) 2016 has not been commenced.

### **Expressions of interest from controlled schools**

CSSC understands that the establishment of temporary resource provisions in 2020/21 represented an emergency response. Working in partnership with the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectoral bodies, CSSC understands that the draft Special Education Strategic Area Plan, which is currently the subject of public consultation, is an attempt to implement a more strategic approach to the establishment of specialist provisions in mainstream schools and to move away from the reactive approach which characterised the establishment of temporary resource provisions in 2020/21. CSSC would contend that in establishing the need for specialist provision that a clear rationale is provided with respect to where and in which school the EA proposes to establish that provision so that it is clear for Governors and Principals that they have been considered as possible sites for this type of provision. While CSSC understands that one of the objectives of Pilot 2 is to provide opportunity for interested parties (including affected schools) to have their views considered before final decisions are taken, it is crucial that going forward schools interested in facilitating specialist provision are able to inform the Education Authority's plans ahead of implementation. Some schools, for whom specialist provision is not proposed, have informed CSSC of their willingness to facilitate such provision. CSSC has communicated schools' expressions of interest to the Education Authority on a number of occasions and understands that these expressions of interest are held by EA's Area Planning Team responsible for Special Schools and Specialist Provisions. CSSC would emphasise in this context its support for all of the specialist provisions proposed as part of Pilot 2 as well as its support for the associated progression of specialist provision pathways in many of these schools (ie Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 or Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4).

### **Type of specialist provision**

The Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in mainstream schools identified the regional inconsistencies in specialist provision in both mainstream primary and post-primary schools. CSSC notes that the proposed Pilot 2 provisions, while welcome, focus solely on the establishment of Learning and Social Communication classes. CSSC understands that The Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools identified that only seven of the 11 Local Government Districts have Speech and Language provisions established in primary schools and CSSC is aware that different legacy arrangements govern the type of provisions available as well as access to these provisions. While some former Education and Library Boards required a child to have a statement of special educational needs to access provision other former Education and Library Boards did not. CSSC is aware of the significant work that has been undertaken by the Languages and Communication Service in regionalising its service and ensuring equity and would highlight that controlled schools have expressed a willingness to facilitate provisions which support the language and communication of pupils.

### **Specialist provision in mainstream pre-school settings**

CSSC notes that the Education Authority's 2018 public consultation on the draft framework for children in the early years with SEN included proposals regarding a pilot of Early Years SEN Centres in up to six mainstream early years settings across the EA. CSSC understands

that many of the proposals included in this proposed framework are now being considered as part of the SEND Strategic Development Programme's work. CSSC understood through conversations with the EA Early Years Inclusion Service that the proposed adult:child ratio for specialist provision for children in the early years was 1:12, along with classroom assistant support. In addition to providing a small group environment it was intended to be a year in which parents could be supported to consider if a mainstream or a special school placement, going forward, would best meet the needs of their child. CSSC notes that the draft Special Educational Strategic Area Plan, in stating its intention to increase parity of access for all to appropriate pathways, identifies pre-school as one of the phases of education for which there is the intention to identify and address shortfalls in special school provision. Considering the emphasis on enhancing specialist provision in mainstream schools it is timely for the pilot proposed in the 2018 proposals to be implemented and consideration given again to a pilot of Early Years SEN Centres.

### **Training which is responsive to a changing pupil profile**

In responding to the previous consultations on the draft framework for specialist provision in mainstream schools and the associated Pilot 1 pre-publication consultation, CSSC commented on the need for training to be developed that is specific to the type of specialist provision facilitated by the school, the needs of its children and young people and for that training to be informed by the views of practitioners in relation to the needs of children attending. In consulting with controlled schools named in Pilot 2 CSSC was encouraged to hear positive comments about the support received in supporting the establishment of specialist provision, however, a recurring message was the rushed nature of the establishment of these provisions with many schools not notified until the end of June leaving little time to allow for the refurbishment of rooms and the appropriate training of staff ahead of school re-opening in September. Some schools referred to a process of support that while not perfect at the outset has improved over time. It is crucial that there is learning from the experiences of these schools and that the establishment of future specialist provisions benefit from the experiences of those earlier established provisions.

### **Continued professional development of specialist provision staff**

Continued professional development of staff in the specialist provisions was another recurring theme and schools highlighted that the ability to engage with other schools with Social Communication specialist provision was 'invaluable'. Feedback in relation to the training provided for staff in the specialist provision referred to the need for it to be better 'paced' noting that the training received was intensive and that provisions need more time to plan for, implement and evaluate the provision put in place. Schools were in agreement that training should be provided on an annual basis and be responsive to the needs of the current cohort of pupils. The need for training to support children who have medical needs was also highlighted.

### **Training and staff retention**

Principals welcome the progression of pathways from P1 to P7 and the training, advice and guidance provided. They highlighted the difficulties that the temporary nature of the provision had on staffing with the need for approval of permanent status to allow for the appointment of permanent staff to reduce the need for staff to look for options elsewhere due to the insecure nature of their employment. The need for a readily available menu of training to be provided for these provisions is an important consideration as staff will for a variety of reasons move on to new posts and it is crucial that there is continuity in the children's learning experience and that the expertise which the member of staff has developed is not lost to the provision. In relation to staffing the specialist provisions CSSC was advised that the rigid employment criteria could prevent consideration of candidates extremely well placed to facilitate this type of provision. While CSSC has not had sight of the employment criteria and understands that such criteria should be rigorous to ensure the best candidate is secured, it was noted that the expectation that the successful candidate should be employed as a teacher for the last five years ignored other relevant experience such as the experience of teaching for a lesser period of time in a special school or being a classroom assistant in a special school prior to undertaking a teaching qualification.

### **Facilitating collaboration between special schools and specialist provisions**

The need to facilitate cluster working to enable specialist provisions to avail of the expertise of special schools was also clear and CSSC notes that this is a key theme of the Draft Special Educational Strategic Area Plan 2022-27 which makes the commitment to promote cooperation, collaboration and sharing between all Special Schools and Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools across all sectors (as appropriate). CSSC fully endorses the associated actions of this key theme and strongly recommends that opportunities to share effective practice are appropriately resourced with the required substitute cover that will allow staff the time to collaborate meaningfully. CSSC would note that the advances made in using virtual environments for collaboration could play a part in allowing for effective sharing across the region.

### **Supporting those long-established specialist provisions in mainstream schools**

While there is this clear understanding that both special schools and mainstream schools are providing for children with more complex needs training for staff needs to keep pace with this recognition. CSSC is aware of schools which having well-established specialist provision in place for a number of years, have not received, yet would welcome the support of a multi-disciplinary team to enhance their efforts to meet the increasing complexity of need presenting in their schools. CSSC is aware that some schools have found themselves in the position of being asked to accept additional pupils into their Learning Support Centres which exceed the recommended class size of 12 for a learning support provision. The level of need presenting in some mainstream schools with specialist provision has led to some settings realising that on occasions a class size of 12 pupils in a general learning support class does not allow for effective provision and the limitation of some schools' accommodation does not allow for the breakout space which would facilitate calmer classrooms. It is crucial that with an understanding of the increasing complexity of need presenting in some schools that an effort is made to support those legacy provisions with training that addresses the changing pupil profile. CSSC would also contend that staff in these long established specialist provisions could contribute to the capacity building of staff

in newly established provisions and should also be included in any arrangements for cluster working. Addressing the accommodation requirements of legacy provisions is also key in going forward.

### **Responding to school's willingness to accommodate additional provision**

In engaging with the named controlled schools a number which, if they had the required accommodation, would facilitate additional specialist provision and they referred to a very real need which could be met with additional specialist provision on site. Where this is found to be the case CSSC would recommend that the school's accommodation is assessed by EA's Operations and Estates and consideration is given to enhancing the school site so that the school can respond to the need presenting in an area.

### **Supporting appropriate pathways post-16**

CSSC endorses the Fair Start report's focus on ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment and is aware of the concerns of many schools in relation to securing appropriate pathways for children with SEN. Through our representation on the SEND PRG group CSSC has highlighted the concerns of special schools regarding the void in the support that young people receive when they transfer to Adult Services and is conscious that one of the SEND SDP projects (the business cases for which await ministerial approval) is the Transitions Project. CSSC is encouraged that another of the key themes of the draft Special Educational Strategic Area Plan is that of increasing parity of access for all to appropriate pathways. CSSC notes that Principals of non-selective controlled schools with specialist provision have received enquiries from parents regarding the potential for their child to receive continued provision at the school post-16. This issue was raised at an Area Planning engagement session with Principals on 10 March 2022 and CSSC was encouraged by the EA's willingness to consider a possible pilot in relation to post-16 specialist provision. As an extension of this there also needs to be consideration of supporting the development of relevant and meaningful qualifications for children who attend specialist provision. CSSC is conscious that the Entitlement Framework requires schools to work to ensure economically relevant and individually engaging courses with clear progression pathways and notes the requirement that schools offer access to a minimum number of courses at KS4 and Post-16 of which at least a third must be general and one third applied. One Principal expressed frustration at having to seek annual approval for an Extended Diploma Course which has served the young people well and allowed for the relevant progression required by DE which includes further and higher education or to move into training or employment. CSSC is keen that in going forward that the leaders of mainstream schools with specialist provision are supported to develop these appropriate pathways and consultation with practitioners in relation to the qualifications which will best serve these pupils is recommended.

### **Supporting the response to challenging behaviour**

Dealing with the challenging behaviour that some children present with was also highlighted as a key area of concern for the leadership of mainstream schools with specialist provision and references to the need for appropriate training which supports staff capacity and confidence were made by a number of controlled schools. Principals of both primary and post-primary schools referenced the Team Teach model which CSSC understands is only available to the staff of special schools. The model includes de-escalation strategies that pre-empt and have the potential to negate the need for physical restraint. CSSC is conscious that the NICCY Rights based review of restraint and seclusion emphasises that 'restraint should only ever be used as a measure of very last resort... and teachers must attend rigorous training to ensure safety is paramount and that focus in on prevention, de-escalation and reflective practice.' CSSC would agree with this assertion and understands that there is a lack of guidance and support available to schools and as a result staff faced with challenging behaviour are unsure if the actions they take to prevent harm to the child and to others will protect them from litigious action should they intervene physically in any way. CSSC would echo NICCY's calls for the Review to be considered by DE in a timely manner and for schools to receive the necessary guidance, support and training to ensure confidence and assurance that the means they use to respond to challenging behaviour are the most appropriate and effective means which protect the dignity, safety and wellbeing of both pupils and staff.

### **Supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of staff**

In our engagement it was noted that facilitating specialist provision and working to meet the needs of all children can take its toll on the emotional health and wellbeing of staff in specialist provisions and supporting staff to manage the challenges of this role is crucial. CSSC notes the recognition in the DE Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework of 'our collective responsibility in supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of our children and young people and those working with them.' One of the recommendations in the Framework is that of 'fostering a culture of trust where all staff feel valued and know how to access support if needed, for example, through the use of staff debriefing/supervision.' CSSC is conscious that allowing opportunities for staff debriefing/supervision firstly requires the staff providing these opportunities to be appropriately trained. CSSC would therefore contend that EA considers how to support staff in controlled schools to be able to capably provide this type of support to staff in circumstances where they have encountered challenging behaviour. CSSC would also refer the Area Planning team to the work currently being undertaken by EA to promote Trauma Informed Practice in schools which also has an emphasis on supporting staff to deal with secondary and vicarious trauma experienced through their roles.

CSSC welcomes the extension of specialist provisions in controlled schools and is happy to discuss this response.

Yours faithfully



Mark Baker  
Chief Executive