


An evaluation of Middletown Centre for Autism

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The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement



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1. Introduction

The Middletown Centre for Autism (the Centre) established in 2007 reflects the continued commitment by the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) and the Department of Education and Skills (Republic of Ireland) to the development of services for children and young people with autism and for those with more complex needs. Funding for the Centre, which is overseen by a board of directors, is provided equally by the two departments to support the development of provision for children and young people on the autism spectrum. The Centre provides specialist and intensive support and services to schools and parents as a second tier service, where the autism support services in the respective jurisdictions have not been able to effect appropriate improvements in education and socialisation skills for the children and young people with whom they work. The Centre engages simultaneously with schools and parents to ensure an intensive and consistent approach. The Centre provides an extensive training programme for parents, schools, and a range of professionals offering opportunities to develop knowledge and skills regarding effective practices in educational provision for children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The referral process for Northern Ireland to the Centre is by the Education Authority with an agreed 30 new pupil referrals per annum. The Education Authority, in agreement with the Centre, can make a whole school referral for advice and support for autism for three to four terms, with the aim of promoting an effective and consistent approach by larger schools with a significant number of pupils with autism. Acting on a key recommendation in the evaluation report of 2012, the Middletown Learning Support and Assessment Service now operates on a pilot basis in the Republic of Ireland. It provides a second-tier service which aims to complement and support the first-tier services for children and young people on the autism spectrum provided by the Department of Education and Skills through the National Educational Psychological Service, Special Education Support Service, National Behavioural Support Service, National Council for Special Education and Health Services Executive (HSE), and HSE funded services. In the Republic of Ireland, a panel, comprising of a representative from the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Special Education, and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, refer an agreed 12 pupils to the pilot project.

2. Inspection method and evidence base

An evaluation of the Middletown Centre for Autism was carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills in April 2012¹.

This follow-on evaluation of the Centre focuses on the areas for further development which were part of the inspection findings of the April 2012 report. The evaluation takes account of:

- interviews and discussions with ten parents;
- interviews and discussions with staff in schools receiving support from the Centre;
- inspection visits to 13 special and mainstream primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;

¹ <https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/joint-inspection-middletown-centre-autism>

- the attendance at parental, and at professional training events, along with the resulting completed evaluation data;
- in-depth discussions with the chairperson of the board of directors, the Centre's chief executive and senior management team, members of the research and development team, and representatives of the learning support team; and
- telephone interviews conducted with five parents, four schools, and a representative of an organisation which has commissioned several training events from the Centre for their members.

3. Focus of inspection

The original inspection of Middletown Centre for Autism in April 2012 concluded that in the work inspected, the quality of the provision was outstanding. The Centre was meeting very effectively the needs of the young people, their peers, parents and professionals, and had demonstrated its capacity for sustained improvement. The key implications of the findings were that the development of the Centre's services should focus on maintaining the services provided at that time and also to:

- develop more strategically the specialist provision and services so that they were available to schools and professionals in the Republic of Ireland;
- ensure that the highly individualised support to young people was expanded and the outcomes analysed objectively within the research remit of the Centre to inform practice and provide practical guidance to parents and professionals;
- improve the teaching and training support by creating a training and teaching classroom facility, for primary and post-primary use;
- improve the extent and potential of information and communication technology (ICT) within the Centre which parents and professionals could access at a distance; and
- 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 a required standard.

In the interval since the inspection, the following actions which affect the work of the Centre have taken place.

- The annual budget of the Centre increased by £980,000 in 2013.
- The number of staff for the Centre has increased from 23 in 2012 to 39 in 2015.
- The provision by the Centre has increased to include a pilot for children and young people from the Republic of Ireland, following the establishment of a referral panel.
- Within Northern Ireland there are whole-school referrals involving longitudinal training for staff and advice for between one to four terms.

- Additional specialist support staff, including music and drama therapists, and psychologists, have been employed, to provide advice and training alongside the Centre's trans-disciplinary staff.
- There are planned 'swap shop' sessions every three weeks where members of staff share professional expertise, and assessment and learning materials.
- The training provided by the Centre is needs led and includes variable length programmes for professionals and parents in a range of contemporary topics within autism.
- The Centre has been involved in the outworking of the Northern Ireland Autism Strategy, including providing autism support training to parents and carers.
- An international autism conference on a bi-annual basis is run by the Centre, aimed at attracting international speakers to inform debate on contemporary issues.
- The Centre continues to develop further links with the health services of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- The office accommodation at the Centre has been expanded and renovated where required.

4. Overall findings of the inspection

- The quality of leadership and management is outstanding. The senior management team and the board of directors have provided leadership of very high quality to further improve services since the last inspection. The Centre has developed provision and services in agreement with the Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Education, and there is evidence that in both jurisdictions they are impacting significantly on the education and life experiences of the referred pupils, their teachers and parents. The Centre's data shows that up to April 2016, in the Republic of Ireland, 14,851 parents and 17,250 professionals, and in Northern Ireland, 4,544 parents and 19,922 professionals attended the Centre's training events which are held in venues across the island, including Cork, Galway, Dun Laoghaire, Belfast, Middletown and Coleraine. In 2015/16, 151 organisations commissioned training in autism to meet the needs of their members, 85 in Northern Ireland and 66 in the Republic of Ireland.
- The Centre's data indicates that the highly individualised, trans-disciplinary support for autism to children and young people has expanded due to the additional staffing facilitated by the increase in the Centre's budget. Inspection evidence from observations and the Centre's research data, demonstrates that staff working with their caseloads of pupils, schools and parents have developed further their extensive and holistic specialist skills which are highly valued, and lead to improved outcomes for the pupils both at school and at home. The comprehensive and highly detailed individual learning plans, based on thorough assessments, produced by the Centre's co-ordinators are very effective and used well by almost all of the schools concerned to support their pupils. The Centre has developed a highly effective whole school training and support model in addition to individual learning support and assessment, that involves

observations of practice in the school, a planned programme for regular staff and parental training sessions, and ongoing advice over three to four terms. This highly effective work raises whole school practice for autism and subsequent outcomes for the children and young people. The board of directors is informed at each board meeting of the Centre's ongoing work.

- The research team is highly involved in all aspects of the Centre's extensive procedures for self-evaluation. The Centre places a high priority on analysing the outcomes for each child and young person, referred for learning support and assessment. This research includes questionnaires and interviews with staff, parents and pupils, and is conducted six months after the support has ended. The research team is currently involved in analysing the aggregate data, and has analysed the outcomes of the first pupil referrals in detail, with the intention of publishing and presenting their findings at relevant conferences. This will inform future practice by the Centre, and subsequently teachers and parents attending training; and the schools the Centre supports and advises.
- The Centre's research team has evaluated the improvement in practice and support for the pupils with autism in the three schools involved in the whole school support model, and the findings are used well to inform planning and practice for further whole school support projects. The Centre, with the National Council for Special Education, Republic of Ireland, has designed a framework for evaluating autism specific practice in all educational settings.
- Other examples of the research team's work include: collating and analysing training session questionnaires to inform future training; publishing regular research bulletins to inform professionals working with children and young people with autism and providing summaries of relevant peer-review articles; compiling pupil referral profile data for a comprehensive database; and establishing an innovative project to determine the efficacy of parental training through workshops over five weeks on reducing anxiety experienced by children and young people with autism. Research findings are disseminated on the Centre's website, through presentations at conferences and published papers. An evaluation of Attention Autism training for schools in the Republic of Ireland has been completed by the research team and the Special Education Support Service.
- Primary and post-primary classrooms have been created in the Centre for training purposes, and this facility has contributed to the development of teachers' skills in organising classrooms to address more effectively the needs of their pupils. The Centre's most frequently used method of assessment and training, however, takes place within the referred pupil's own classroom, and involves the pupil, peers and classroom staff, with simultaneous home support and complementary training for family members. This training model is innovative, evaluated robustly, highly valued by parents and schools, and is particularly effective in developing parental and staff confidence and skills in supporting pupils with autism.
- The Centre has commenced an effective phased upgrade of its ICT infrastructure. The Centre's team has developed an informative and highly regarded animated film on autism, subsequently used for World Autism Day. At the request of the Department of Education Northern Ireland, the Centre has completed a detailed audit of autism training services in Northern Ireland to inform its planning, and has agreed a process for developing further, and

providing greater access to e-learning training. Two on-line learning resources for sensory processing, and for best practice in autism, are currently available, and these have been shared with C2k for access by schools in Northern Ireland including downloadable resources, video explanations and case studies. Parents and schools interviewed as part of this inspection have indicated that further e-learning opportunities would be a welcome addition following the training and support they have received from the Centre.

- The Centre has liaised extensively since inception with a number of higher education institutions, including Stranmillis University College, and St Mary's University College, Belfast, Ulster University, St Angela's College, Sligo, and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. It is commendable that pathways to relevant academic training and accreditation have been achieved through mutual co-operation and professional respect. The Centre has provided highly effective input to under-graduate training in Stranmillis University College, as well as St Patrick's and St Angela's Colleges and is currently working with the University of Limerick to devise modules for a new jointly devised post-graduate Certificate in Autism.
- The service provided by the Centre in the Republic of Ireland has resulted in significant benefits for pupils, families and schools. Key strengths of the Centre's involvement relate to the trans-disciplinary nature of the service, and the extent and duration of the Centre's involvement with pupils' homes and schools simultaneously. Offering intensive support across home and school has led to a more co-ordinated approach to meeting the needs of pupils. In developing further the service in the Republic of Ireland as part of the pilot phase, the nomination and referral arrangements continue to evolve and further guidance will be required to provide clarity around roles of the various professionals involved, including the Centre personnel, the National Educational Psychology Service personnel, and the National Council for Special Education. Particular attention needs to be given at the conclusion of an intervention to manage and support sensitively, effective transition of cases from the Centre to first-tier services.

5. Overall effectiveness

The Middletown Centre for Autism has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The Education and Training Inspectorate and the Inspectorate in the Department of Education and Skills will monitor how the Centre sustains improvement.

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