

# ***A Call For Change:*** ***Time For Action***

Meeting the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs in Catholic maintained schools

Executive Summary



**CCMS**  
Council for Catholic  
Maintained Schools



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# Introduction

The Catholic maintained schools sector upholds the values espoused in Catholic Social Teaching which emanate from the gospel message of Christ. Catholic Social Teaching offers a way of thinking, being and seeing the world. It provides a vision for a just society in which the dignity of all people is recognised and upholds the rights of those who are vulnerable.

The key principles of Catholic Social Teaching can be summarised under the following headings:

- **The Life and Dignity of the Human Person**
- **A Call to Family, Community and Participation**
- **Rights and Responsibilities**
- **Options for the Poor and the Vulnerable**
- **Dignity of Work and the Rights of the Workers**
- **Solidarity**
- **Care for all of God's Creation**

In the Catholic school, Catholic Social Teaching is used to reflect on and guide how the learning and teaching community can respond to the challenge of providing excellence of educational experience and opportunity for all pupils. Subsequently, our schools conduct their duties from a position that:

“involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”

(Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis)

In terms of Special Educational Needs (SEN), Catholic Social Teaching encourages us to:

- **Look at the issues**
- **Understand what is happening**
- **Discern the actions needed to respond.**

In early 2018, the CCMS consulted with the school leaders in the Catholic maintained sector seeking to identify the key issues and challenges facing schools at that point. The feedback from that consultation formed the basis of an agenda for a series of engagement events held later that year. Throughout those engagement events, the single most significant issue raised by those school leaders was their concern around the adequacy of the provision they were able to make for children and young people with SEN. As a result, CCMS set up a working group to ascertain the views of the sector on current SEN provision within the community of Catholic maintained schools.

# Key Findings

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The evidence across all of the phases within the Catholic maintained sector included in the work of the SEN working group indicates an almost year on year increase in the number of children presenting with varying degrees of SEN and/or disability. While some are identified at an early stage in their educational journey and are supported by school staff and external support agencies, the current conditions in schools are very difficult and at times fall very short of addressing many of the modern day, challenging and complex needs of all of the pupils and staff.

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The pupils, parents and staff who contributed to the review by the CCMS SEN working group raised many concerns, including the:

- perceived lack of joined up thinking and partnership working at Government, system and school level to address SEN;
- lack of sufficient funding to meet the needs of all children with SEN;
- lack of provision school staff and other professionals from external agencies can make for children and young people with SEN and/or disability;
- amount of teacher time required to deal with SEN related issues and the impact of this on whole class teaching;
- additional pressures placed on the SENCo and school principal;
- restrictions in the number of children that schools can refer for assessment to the Educational Psychology Service;
- limitations and the bureaucracy of the statementing process and the negative impact this has on access to resources and smooth transitions between educational phases;
- restrictive and outdated system structures that limit the ability to deploy a range of suitably qualified professionals appropriate to the needs of all children;
- limited availability of, and access to, high quality specialist training to ensure equality and consistency in the approach, techniques and strategies used by staff to address both the specific and more general needs of the children and young people with SEN;
- issues raised for those who attend small rural schools, regarding the availability of specialist services in rural areas; and,
- delay in the implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy/Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI).





Whilst all schools are committed to the principle of inclusion and improving the provision and life chances for children with SEN and/or disability, it is evident that many staff are concerned by the limitations, practicalities and increased workload that comes with this. This is having a detrimental impact on the day-to-day working in some schools and on staff morale.

All parties surveyed agreed that early identification and intervention can make a vast difference to a child's educational outcomes and life chances – a position supported by research. They strongly promote the idea of working in partnership with pupils, parents, school professionals and external agencies/specialists.

Pre-school staff and some primary principals raised concerns about many missed opportunities to identify pupils with less obvious difficulties prior to starting pre-school and, at times, primary school. Some post-primary staff had similar concerns regarding early identification of SEN in relation to Literacy, Numeracy, and, social, emotional and behavioural needs.

Across the board, principals reported inappropriate and unacceptable delays in accessing assessment and diagnosis by an educational psychologist as well as intervention from external agencies. Responses highlighted that some children do not undergo formal assessment by an educational psychologist as soon as required; leaving schools trying to meet their needs without the necessary support and resource from external services.

Many schools have been proactive in seeking and sharing best practice from and with other schools. This has helped to build confidence in gathering and recording evidence and applying a range of appropriate strategies to match and address children's individual needs. However, schools view this engagement as having limitations where access to centralised quality professional development for teachers is inconsistent. This impacts on the capacity of school staff to meet the needs of all pupils with SEN.

The working group reported their concerns regarding equity of access to resources for all children and young people with SEN, including in house provision, specialist provision and services from external providers. Access to specialist provision, particularly for specialist units in rural settings, has been highlighted as an issue with some children having to travel long journeys to have their individual needs catered for.

The quality and physical condition of accommodation devoted to special educational needs in some schools is inappropriate and in need of urgent improvement.

Many of the issues raised and recommendations made in this paper have been identified in previous reports and evaluations by a range of stakeholders with little progress made to address these.





There is little that could be claimed to be new or innovative thinking; the point being, that these arguments have been made time and time again. It is now time to make further progress in realising positive outcomes for our CCMS schools.





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# Recommendations

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**We recognise the need for strong, courageous and visionary leadership at all levels in the education system in order to deliver the proposed recommendations outlined below:**

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## Early Intervention

1. Development of a pro-active consistent approach to early identification and intervention, where all professionals have a shared understanding, commitment and responsibility in delivering agreed systems and processes.
2. Equity of access for pupils with SEN to a range of preventative and compensatory programmes (to include in school/external agencies/community services).
3. Impactful services such as counselling to be made available to all schools.
4. Nurture provision to be made available in all of our schools.
5. Establishment of statutory screening of children at 3 years old, prior to transition to pre-school settings.
6. A review of funding to ensure that the relevant staff in all pre-school, primary and post-primary schools can access and make referrals to the Educational Psychology Service as and when required.
7. Consideration given as to whether it would be more efficient and beneficial to pupils to have an independent Educational Psychology Service.
8. Improved sharing of personal, social, emotional and cognitive information at each transition stage.
9. Investment in human and financial resources that is in-keeping with responsible stewardship of the public purse and supportive of the Common Good.

## Partnership Working

1. Enhanced arrangements for partnership working at: (i) Government level; (ii) system level; and, (iii) local level, including a review of how partner agencies interact with each other and ensuring clarity around roles and responsibilities of all partners with provision for a key professional with oversight of intervention.
2. The establishment of local partnership initiatives, similar to the models in Glasgow and Finland, where pupils, parents, school staff, health visitors, nurses, social workers, educational psychologists and community organisations etc. come together regularly to discuss individual pupil's needs, current provision and what additional provision is required.



## Investing in People

1. Clarity in defining how the Learning Support Co-ordinator role will complement the existing SENCo role.
2. Dedicated training, resources and time for Learning Support Co-ordinators / SENCos to support them in their roles.
3. A review of legislation and regulations to make arrangements for Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) (including Initial Teacher Education) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) a statutory requirement, to provide the time necessary for all relevant staff to avail of CPD and to make provision for the difficulties encountered by staff in small schools where middle leaders and teaching principals have multiple roles.
4. A reimagining and remodelling of the staffing structures to better address the mix of professional skills required to address the needs of pupils with SEN.
5. A review of existing funding arrangements to achieve the maximum delegation of resources to schools, giving them the autonomy to prioritise spending on CPD and TPL to meet the individual needs of the school and its pupils.
6. Development of a strategy to better enable and support sharing of expertise from the highly trained staff in special schools as the dissemination of such concentrated expertise and knowledge would provide opportunities for staff in mainstream and specialist unit settings to gain CPD in other areas of SEN.

## Bureaucratic Burden

1. A review of the processes for the identification, assessment and record-keeping associated with SEN to ensure that these are streamlined and that the information on pupils is shared and used more efficiently between partnership agencies.
2. A review of the process leading to a statement of special educational needs to ensure a timely and appropriate response to the needs of children.

## Specialist Provision

1. A review of existing provision to ensure an appropriate and equitable network of specialist provision, supported by clear criteria for establishing the local need for units.
2. Capital investment to support the broadening of access in fit for purpose school accommodation.
3. A commitment, expressed in policy and supported with appropriate resources, to the development of whole school approaches to nurture including the establishment of additional nurture units to ensure equitable access.
4. A more strategic approach to support the sharing of expertise from staff in special schools with professionals in other settings.



## Funding Special Educational Needs and Allocation of Resources

1. Prioritisation of the funding model for education to reflect 'New Decade, New Approach' (2020), to improve further the broad educational outcomes and the life chances of every child.
2. Funding models to be directed at the needs of all pupils with SEN and delegated into school budgets so that locally informed decisions can be made, prioritised and resourced.
3. Additional funding to facilitate and support TPL/CPD/capacity building, dedicated time and more effective partnership working.
4. An 'invest to save' strategy with adjustments to the age-weighted funding for each child to better support the development of meaningful early identification and early intervention strategies which in turn may reduce the likelihood of children progressing to subsequent stages of the Code of Practice.
5. Additional investment to facilitate equity of access to resources for all pupils with SEN including in house provision, specialist provision and services from external providers.
6. A review of spending on the administration and bureaucracy behind the access to services.

## Legislation

1. Continued prioritisation of high quality provision for SEN as set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal (2020).
2. Legislation that directs and supports inclusive education systems, embedding a fundamental commitment to every child and young person's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.
3. Full implementation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI).



# Conclusion

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**The working group recognises that it is easier to make untested suggestions as to how things might be improved than to turn suggestions into reality. We must ensure that in shining a light on one part of the service, in this case the provision for children with special educational needs, that we do not overlook the need for an integrated, service wide review of all other aspects of education.**

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That said, the working group would offer a challenge to us all: if we are to be truly inclusive, catering for every child's needs, then we must adopt an approach that is less formulaic and more centred on meeting the needs of every child including those with special educational needs. We must challenge ourselves to develop a system of education built around the needs of children. We must have compassion for those in our society with most needs and ensure that we make provision for those children and families that are the most vulnerable.

In developing a new approach to the provision for children with SEN we must move away from a culture where everything must be fought for to one which assumes service as a right.

We would make one final observation. There is little in this paper that could be claimed to be new or innovative thinking; the point being, that these arguments have been made time and time again by researchers, by education authorities, through government reviews and by our own school professionals. It is now time to make further progress in realising positive outcomes for our CCMS schools. A strong leadership culture needs to be developed at all levels to ensure that our recommendations for improvement in SEN provision are implemented and sustained. This will also ensure that these improvements are owned by everyone and are embedded in our education system.





*This is a call  
for change -  
a time for action.*

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