



**Middletown Centre for Autism:
Business Plan 2023-2024**

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Section 1: Introduction

This business plan outlines the work which Middletown Centre for Autism (the Centre) will undertake in N Ireland and Ireland to support autistic children and young people, their parents and families and the education professionals and schools who work with them during the financial year 2023 – 2024. It will describe the targets and objectives which the Centre has agreed with its funding Departments. This plan will be available to the public through the Centre’s website at www.middletownautism.com. The Centre will report on its effectiveness in delivering on the plans, targets and objectives in its annual report for 2023 – 2024 which is usually published in August, and which can be accessed via the Centre’s website.

A brief background to the Centre

Middletown Centre for Autism was established as part of a range of education policy initiatives arising from the Good Friday Agreement. The Centre was opened in April 2007 to deliver educational services on an all-island basis for autistic children, their parents and families and the education professionals who work with them.

The creation of the Centre reflects the commitment by the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) and Department of Education (Ireland) to the development of services for those young people who experience complex autism and long-term needs. Funding is provided equally by the two Departments to support the Centre in its provision of specialist support and services not currently available to the education sector in either jurisdiction.

The Centre is established under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Orders 1986 to 1990 as a company limited by guarantee. The objects of the Centre are set out in Section 3 of the Memorandum and Articles of Association.

The Ministers of Education (NI) and Education (Ireland) are accountable to their respective legislatures for the activities and performance of the Centre.

The Purpose of the Centre

Our Mission

“Support the promotion of excellence throughout Northern Ireland and Ireland in the education of children and young people with autism”

Our Vision

“To enhance the lives of children and young people with autism, and their families, through the delivery of specialist educational services”

A Focus on Excellence

The Centre has over the last sixteen years built a reputation for excellence in the quality of its services and this has been confirmed by independent joint inspections in 2012 and 2016.

Section 2: A Specialist Provider of Autism Services Throughout Ireland

The Centre has been established primarily as a specialist second tier service provider to work in partnership with existing statutory and voluntary providers to develop and provide specialist autism services primarily in the education sectors in NI and Ireland. The Centre provides an integrated package of services, including a cohesive, trans-disciplinary learning support and assessment service combined with research and training services together with opportunities for family support and professional development. The Centre has developed an inclusive “wraparound” model for support of autistic children and young people which integrates support in the classroom, the school and the home to ensure that the child and young person maximises the benefits from their education placement.

The Centre uses a neuro-affirming approach to its research into, the development of and the provision of its services. The emergence of the neurodiversity approach in the late 1990’s (Judy Singer et al) has impacted equally on both jurisdictions.

It is now recognised as important to foster an environment that is conducive to neurodiversity, and to recognise and emphasise each person’s individual strengths and talents while also providing support for their differences and needs. These issues are feeding into the world of advocacy and policy responses in both jurisdictions. The Centre is focused on meeting the challenges posed by neurodiversity in planning for, developing and delivering its services to its core service users. Reviewing its training, and the language used and in the use of neuro-affirming supports that are co-produced where possible.

Planning for the future

The Centre and the funding Departments have developed, tested and proved an effective model of support for autistic children and young people to make the most effective use of their educational opportunities. The key challenge for the Centre and the funding Departments now is to scale up this model to allow for its use on a more widespread basis in both jurisdictions and to further broaden its remit to include and promote neuro-affirming practice. The Centre also recognises the potential to work with other government Departments and Non-Governmental bodies in both jurisdictions.

The Centre’s Board and sponsoring Departments have agreed to consider opportunities for the development of the Centre during 2023 and will first consider the current Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (MFSM) and the transfer to a Partnership Agreement between the two Departments. This work will consider:

- The establishment and purpose of the organisation;
- Governance arrangements;
- The role of the departments; and
- The assurance framework

Alongside this the Centre, in conjunction with departments, will undertake preparatory work for a “landscape review”, (subject to funding availability) which will consider the form, function and effectiveness of the organisation. This will be included in the Business Plan for 2023 – 2024 and will inform the development of a new corporate strategy for service delivery for the period 2024 – 2028. This will complement Every CHILD, the Department of Education (NI) Corporate Plan and the Department of Education (Ireland) Statement of Strategy 2021-2023. The Centre will also be required

to prepare for any new service requirements arising from the Autism Act 2011 and Autism (Amendment) Act (NI) 2022 and any other emerging departmental policy priorities.

Dealing with financial uncertainty in 2023 – 2024.

The Centre recognises that 2023 – 2024 will be a period of financial uncertainty, particularly in N Ireland, which may impact on the funds available to support the service delivery targets agreed in this plan. The plan will be kept under review and appropriate actions to adjust the service delivery targets to available funds will be taken.

Section 3: The Services Offered by the Centre

The Centre has identified three core groups of service users for whom it develops and offer services.

- Autistic children and young people with autism
- Families of autistic children and young people. The Centre’s work with this group is provided within an educational context
- Professionals and policy makers working in the autism sector, mainly those based in the education sector but including those health professionals who are school based.

The three core services offered by the Centre to our service users: -

- A Training and Advisory Service
- A Learning Support and Assessment Service (LS&A)
- A Research and Information Service

The Centre has built its success in delivering services on three main foundations.

- The development of high-quality specialist services not available to the education sectors in either jurisdiction
- The integration of these services with those provided by mainstream education providers and
- Flexibility of delivery to service users in terms of location and time and supported by online material and resources.

Core Group	The Centre’s Service Delivery Objective
Children and Young People	<p>The Centre’s focus with this group is to assist children and young people who are referred to the Centre to maximise the benefit from their current educational placement. It does this through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the provision of a trans-disciplinary assessment by the Learning Support and Assessment Service • the development and implementation of a Learning Support Plan (LSP) which may be reflected in a revised Educational Plan for the child or young person. • supporting the development of an autism competent school environment • improving the educational experience and outcome for autistic children and young people in their current educational setting • linking with parents to enable them to support their child’s school-based programmes at home and • liaison with first level services to agree the learning support plan goals and upskill as required.
Parents	<p>The Centre’s primary focus with parents is to deliver second tier autism support to parents in N Ireland and Ireland and to deliver core training to parents in the Republic of Ireland. The Centre does this through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enabling parents to support their children’s education • helping them understand and support their autistic children • increasing parents’ knowledge of autism and how it impacts on their child

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision of education-based home support • provision of advice for the parents of children and young people referred to the LS&A Service • access to autism literature and peer reviewed research • the provision of post diagnostic training, information, and advice for parents in Ireland • provision of specialist led second level training to assist parents in the management of specific difficulties in the education of their child in NI.
Professionals and policy makers	<p>The Centre delivers second level specialist support services to front line professionals who work in education with autistic children and young people; and also colleagues working across relevant government departments who may require research and information on autism. It does this through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Centre’s case study based research programme, supporting the introduction of new research based practice with the provision of resources, information and training to support classroom practice and the sharing of good practice. • research bulletins which distil current specialist research on autism to enable it to be effectively used within schools. • supporting collaboration amongst teachers and the creation of learning communities of good practice. • supporting the delivery of the learning support plan for children and young people referred to the Learning Support and Assessment Service (LS&A). • providing specific training for those professionals working with children and young people referred to the Learning Support and Assessment Service • the identification and development of needs led training programmes for educational professionals. • developing and providing access to an autism specific research network. • helping professionals reduce their dependency on external support. • helping schools to improve the capacity to meet the identified needs of autistic children and young people earlier and more effectively through learning and teaching. • Working in partnership with statutory and voluntary sector partners to provide holistic support for schools in developing essential leadership behaviours to develop good autism education provision. • supporting schools in developing essential leadership behaviours to develop good autism education provision.

Section 4: Business Plan Actions for 2023-24:

WHAT WE WILL DO AND BY WHEN	HOW WILL WE KNOW IF ANYONE IS BETTER OFF?	
	N Ireland	Ireland
1. Providing Training Services		
<p>1.1 N Ireland</p> <p>Parental and Professional training</p> <p>The Centre will develop and deliver a comprehensive training programme by March 2024 for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1000 parents and siblings • 3300 differentiated places for a range of professionals • an additional 2000 training places as part of the enhanced training programme for NI teachers, which can be increased on demand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number / % of general programme participants reporting training as very good/ excellent • Number / % of parents reporting training as very good/ excellent • Number of professional programme participants reporting training as very good/ excellent <p>The Centre will provide DE(NI) with a copy of the training evaluation report 22/23 when programme concludes in July 2023.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Helping and Learning – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>1.2 Ireland</p> <p>Professional Training</p> <p>The Centre’s professional training programme will provide 7000 differentiated training opportunities for professionals in Ireland. This will include Training required by the NCSE and training required by DE Ireland to support the planned increase in new autism classes and autism units as per DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 3, Strategic action 2</p> <p>Parental Training</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Centre will evaluate its training programmes and will aim to have a satisfaction rating of 80-90 % in categories 4 (very Good) and 5 (excellent). • The Centre will use as a baseline, data collected for 2023-2024. • Training will be monitored to ensure that it remains on target to achieve the target of 14,000 training opportunities. • A full evaluation report will be made available at the

<p>The centre will provide 7000 training opportunities for parents in Ireland.</p>		<p>end of the training programme in July 2023.</p> <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 3, Strategic action 2</p>
<p>1.3 NI/Ireland Training Joint Actions.</p> <p>Post graduate Training programme;</p> <p>N Ireland</p> <p>The Centre will continue to work with Stranmillis University College (20 places) to build on current accreditation secured for its training programmes and to ensure that educationalists on the Island have access to a broad and balanced range of research based higher education CPD opportunities by March 2024.</p> <p>The Centre will also explore the option of developing a similar programme with St Mary’s University College and Ulster University.</p> <p>Ireland</p> <p>The Centre will continue to work with the University of Limerick to deliver the GCAS (65 places) / MA (20 places) In Autism Studies. This is to ensure that educationalists on the Island have access to a broad and balanced range of research based higher education CPD opportunities by March 2024.</p>		<p>The Centre will continue to conduct mixed methods follow up with all graduates of the programme annually.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90% retention and completion rate in all graduate courses • 100 % of students reporting that the graduate course will have or has already had significant impact on their practice <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Helping and Learning – see Annex A.</p> <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 3, Strategic action 2.</p>
<p>2. Provision of Learning Support and Assessment Services</p>		
<p>2.1 NI Service Action</p> <p>The Centre will deliver a Learning Support and Assessment Service</p>	<p>On completion of the Learning Support and Assessment programme, all children will</p>	

<p>for referred children and young people in N Ireland (60 referrals from Education Authority) by March 2024.</p>	<p>benefit and at least 70% of parents and professionals will identify moderate to large improvements across the core areas of difficulty experienced by the young person, and at least 70% will identify goal achievement as ‘as expected’ or higher following completion of the programme.</p> <p>Links to DE strategic priority Learning – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>2.2 Whole School Programme NI/Ireland Joint Action</p> <p>The Centre will discuss with both funding Departments the expansion of whole school provision in Northern Ireland and Ireland, commencing in 2024-25, and will provide its current whole school provision in NI, based on the current model of practice, by March 24.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90% of schools who undertake the whole school approach will report an improvement in relation to the learning journey of autistic children and young people within their school. • 75% of school staff involved in the Whole School Programme will report an improvement in relation to the learning journey of autistic children & young people within their school. • 75% of school staff involved in the Whole School Programme will report an improvement in relation to their continued professional development. <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Championing, Learning and Delivering – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>2.3 School Accreditation Pilot Scheme N Ireland</p> <p>During 2023/24, the Centre will continue with its pilot of an accreditation scheme for schools who have invested in a whole school referral programme. This pilot will take up to 3 years. 2023/24 is year 3 when 2 more schools will complete the programme by March 2024.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% of schools who achieve accreditation will report an improvement in relation to the learning journey for autistic children and young people within their school. <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Championing, Inspiring and Delivering – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>2.4 Ireland Service Action</p> <p>The Centre will expand its Learning Support and Assessment Service for a minimum of 14 referred children and young people in Ireland. The Centre will discuss with the Department a</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On completion of the LS&A programme, at least 75% of parents and professionals will identify moderate to large improvements across the core areas of difficulty

<p>plan for the Expansion of this service during 2023 – 2024.</p> <p>The Centre will review the delivery of training provision for parents in Ireland with a view to expansion of referral work.</p> <p>The Centre will discuss with both funding Departments the expansion of whole school provision in Northern Ireland and Ireland, commencing in 2024-25.</p> <p>The Centre will also explore the development of a pilot scheme for Special Schools with a view to adapting the wraparound MCA support service for children in these schools and imparting knowledge of MCA best practice to teaching professionals in these schools.</p>		<p>experienced by the young person.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of MCA School Partnership Programme. <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 1, Strategic actions 4 & 5</p>
<p>2.5 NI/Ireland Joint Action</p> <p>During 2023/24 the Centre will continue to work with both Departments to review Learning Support and Assessment referral processes to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from all aspects of the service in both jurisdictions.</p>		<p>Production of agreed report outlining proposed changes to the referral process.</p> <p>6 Case studies will be presented to stakeholders from staff and service users to reflect improvements in processes</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Learning and Delivering – see Annex A.</p> <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 1, Strategic actions 4 & 5</p>
<p>3. Improving the wellbeing of children and young people</p>		
<p>3.1 Throughout 2023/24, the Centre, in collaboration with DE, EA and other children’s authorities, will work to shape and support educational policies with a view to improving the wellbeing of children and young people as outlined in the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015, and will provide a report to DE when requested.</p>		

	<p>support work as described in Sections 1 and 2 above; it will also provide research support to the EA and Departments to develop additional metrics to measure the outcomes of interventions and policy changes.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Championing and Helping – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>3.2 The Centre will work with DE to develop an agreed plan of work to support the Department in implementing the New SEN Framework arising from the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data development to be considered. • The Centre will agree an action plan in 2023 – 2024 to support the implementation of the New SEN Framework (arising from Special Educational Needs and Disability Act). <p>Links to DE Strategic Priorities Learning and Delivering – see Annex A.</p>	
<p>3.3 Deliver International Conference by May 2023.</p>	<p>The Centre will provide 420 face to face and unlimited online access in its international conference which will be in the International Conference centre Belfast. This will be a mix of parents, education professionals and autistic people.</p> <p>The Centre will conduct an evaluation to establish the outcome of the international conference.</p> <p>Number/ % of delegates reporting that the conference had a positive impact on their life or practice. (target 85%)</p> <p>The Centre will develop a conference paper, which is a set of learning outcomes based on the content of the conference and in particular from the discussion panels. This paper will be shared with all attendees and with the funding Departments. The purpose of this is to stimulate new thinking and innovation based on the conference.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priority Learning – see Annex A.</p> <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 3, Strategic actions 2 & 3</p>	

4. Development of Integrated and Irish Medium Education	
<p>4.1 Throughout 2023/24, the Centre will support DE (NI) in fulfilling its statutory duties to: encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education; encourage, facilitate and support the development of Integrated Education; and will provide a report when requested.</p> <p>Additionally, the Centre will support and provide any report requested by DE (Ireland) relevant to Irish-medium education.</p>	<p>The Centre will provide access to its training programme & commissioned training when requested. It will provide Learning Support and referral services for children referred from IMS and integrated schools.</p> <p>The Centre is presently working with Gaeloideachas to develop a programme of resources, online materials, podcasts and training for use in Irish medium schools. This work will also benefit and be available to Irish Medium Schools across Ireland and Northern Ireland. The final output will be available in the next academic year (Sept 24).</p> <p>The Centre will develop a series of four case studies that will explore the impact of its work with Irish Medium Schools.</p> <p>The Centre will follow-up North and South with service evaluation surveys to determine the effectiveness of the Irish Medium resources.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priority Inspiring – see Annex A.</p> <p>Linked to DoE Ireland Statement of Strategy Goal 1, Strategic action 6</p>
5. Provision of Research and Information Services	
<p>Joint NI – Ireland work</p> <p>5.1 Develop and deliver an island wide research and information programme focused upon the needs of parents, professionals and priorities identified by the funding Departments by March 2024.</p>	<p>Research Bulletins accessed by over 1000 people via website. The Centre will develop an evaluation to measure the % of them reporting that this was useful to their practice or research.</p> <p>Teachers Resources disseminated to 100% of schools. 10% of increased reach and engagement to MCA online resources on Facebook.</p> <p>The MCA team will work in liaison with the EA to update the SEN Resource file.</p> <p>3 case studies produced in relation to the impact of a pupil referral to the Learning Support and Assessment.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priority Learning – see Annex A.</p>
<p>5.2 Ireland Based Research work</p> <p>1. The Centre will work with the NCSE to implement the three recommendations detailed in NCSE Policy Advice No. 5 “Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in</p>	<p>The Centre has completed a review and evaluation of the current approved interventions detailed in the NCSE Policy Advice in 2016; an initial report of findings is complete in November 2022.</p>

<p>Schools” and such other work programmes that will be agreed with NCSE to support its Inclusion Programme.</p> <p>2. The Centre will commence in January 2023 to implement the recommendations of a formal review and updating of the list of evidence informed educational interventions for ASD detailed in the NCSE Policy advice of 2016. This will involve considerable close working with the NCSE. This work has commenced.</p> <p>3. The Centre will work with DE(Ireland) to develop and support the implementation plan for implementing “Supporting Students with Autism: Good Practice Guidance for Schools” throughout Ireland. The Centre will agree the production of a project plan for this work to commence in the 2023 – 2024 academic year.</p> <p>Research Projects</p> <p>The Centre will provide a range of resources to support education staff, including a resource to promote positive mental health in boys and a resource to support transitions from home to school for all ages.</p> <p>The Centre remains responsive to research and development needs highlighted by both funding departments.</p>		<p>The results of this research will be reviewed by NCSE, and plans made to implement the findings in 2023-2024.</p> <p>Further discussions are planned with DE Ireland to agree how the Centre might support the implementation of “Supporting Students with Autism: Good Practice Guidance for Schools” throughout Ireland.</p>
<p>6. Selection and recruitment of specialist staff</p>		
<p>6.1 Managing the selection and recruitment of specialist staff for the Centre.</p>	<p>Improved service delivery for autistic children, young people and their families through the recruitment and retention of high calibre specialist staff.</p>	

<p>During 2023/24 work with both Departments to provide a resolution of the difficulties experienced in the recruitment of specialist staff needed to provide the services offered by the Centre. This includes reviews of strategy, remuneration and the MCA site.</p>	<p>Increased knowledge of autism/ neurodiversity through the in-house research programme.</p> <p>Improved pathways for more autism competent environment in schools and other educational settings.</p> <p>Links to DE Strategic Priority Delivering – see Annex A.</p>
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Section 5
Annex A

Department of Education (Northern Ireland)
Strategic Priorities for 2023-24

CHAMPIONING the needs and aspirations of all our children and young people and the positive impact of education.

HELPING all our children and young people by supporting their well-being and learning.

INSPIRING all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society.

Meeting the **LEARNING** needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential.

DELIVERING an effective, child-first, collaborative and high-quality education system.

Department of Education (Ireland).
Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.

Goal 1:

Support the provision of high-quality education and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students, in schools and early years settings

Goal 2:

Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential

Goal 3:

Together with our partners, provide strategic leadership and support for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the sector