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# Middletown Centre for Autism

## Summary

The Middletown Centre for Autism aims to support the promotion of excellence in the development and coordination of education services to children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The Centre is a cross-border facility jointly funded by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland.

Plans for the establishment of the Centre were announced in 2002; it was officially launched in 2004 following the purchase of the site and it was opened in 2007. Its key proposed benefits were the provision of a diagnostic facility to allow for early diagnosis and assessment; the provision of a residential support centre; and the provision of a training and advisory service.

## Progress made

A 2010 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General concluded that the Centre was unable to deliver the full range of services that had originally been planned and that key services, including working directly with young people with ASD, were not being achieved. The key services and their progress can be summarised as follows:

- **Training, advice and guidance on autism to families and professionals:** training has been provided to over 9,000 professionals and almost 4,000 parents, and an outreach service has supported a number of children;

- **Research and Information to further develop an understanding of autism:** Six research bulletins (summarising published researched) have been published and two cross-border studies are underway;
- **Educational assessment for 180 children with autism annually:** service not yet operational;
- **Learning and support for a planned 140 children each year:** service not yet operational.

The Educational Assessment and Learning and Support Services were reliant on a major building programme which was originally due to be completed in 2010. However, the then Department of Education and Science in Ireland announced in 2009 that it could not provide the necessary funding to expand the centre. While this pause on funding has since been lifted, the building programme has not yet commenced.

### **Issues**

A number of concerns have been raised around the Centre. These include the financial uncertainty facing the Centre and the implications of this for delivering the planned services. Linked to this, the future of the building project is not yet clear; plans for the future of the Centre will be based on a phased 'multi-annual' plan to be agreed between the two Departments.

Value for money is another key issue that has been highlighted, and the Northern Ireland Audit Office has stated that the establishment of the Centre reflects a significant increase in resources, and therefore there is an expectation that it will deliver significant benefits. To date, the Department has provided almost £5.7m of funding to the Centre, and an equal amount has been given by the DES in Ireland.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlights a number of areas that could be considered further. For example, consideration could usefully be given to the 'multi-annual' plan for the Centre once it is published. In particular, consideration could be given to whether this plan includes the originally proposed major building programme and the implications of this in regard to the delivery of the two outstanding services, and in regard to funding.

Consideration could also be given to the extent to which the Centre is achieving value for money at present, together with the likely out workings of the plan and their implications in this regard.

Finally, consideration could be given to the extent to which the Department has put into place robust benchmarking to allow for effective evaluation of the extent to which value for money is being achieved.

## 1 Origins and rationale

In 2002 a report by a Task Group on Autism was published making a series of recommendations on educational provision for children and young people with autism. In particular, it stressed the need for 'significant improvements' in three main areas:<sup>1</sup>

- Access to multi-agency, multi-disciplinary diagnostic and assessment services;
- Training for parents of, and people who work with, children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD); and
- School-based and home-based educational and therapeutic provision.

Similar work was carried out in Ireland, resulting in a 2001 report by the Task Force on Autism. This report set out a number of key principles and practices, including the need for: early diagnosis; a range of provision and support; a multi-disciplinary approach; and appropriate training for all those involved in the education and welfare of children with ASD.<sup>2</sup>

In April 2002 plans were announced to develop an all-island facility for children and young people with ASD, resulting from the work of two task forces. The centre would be based in Middletown, Armagh, and jointly funded by the Department of Education (the Department) in Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland. The Centre would be managed by a Board of Management and trustees established on a joint North/South basis.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Plans for the Centre

The benefits expected from the Centre were outlined in an economic appraisal. The overall aim was for the Centre to support the promotion of excellence in the development and coordination of education services to children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD).<sup>4</sup> The anticipated benefits of the Centre were summarised as:<sup>5</sup>

- Provision of a diagnostic facility to allow for early diagnosis and assessment of children, where all relevant education and health professionals would work with children and their families to achieve effective management of ASD;
- Provision of a residential individual support centre where pupils between the ages of 11 and 19 would receive appropriate educational interventions for finite time periods; and

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education (2002) *Report of the Task Group on Autism* Bangor: DE

<sup>2</sup> Drudy, S. (2001) *Educational Provision and Support for Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders : the Report of the Task Force on Autism* Dublin: The Stationery Office

<sup>3</sup> *Education JC 11 April 2002* [online] Available at: [http://www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org/index/publications/joint-communicues/sectoral-ic/education\\_ic/education\\_ic\\_11\\_april\\_2002.htm](http://www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org/index/publications/joint-communicues/sectoral-ic/education_ic/education_ic_11_april_2002.htm)

<sup>4</sup> The Department of Education, Resource File for Special Educational Need: The Autistic Spectrum

<sup>5</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2009) *Financial Auditing and Reporting 2007-2008: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland* Belfast: The Stationery Office

- Provision of a training and advisory service providing conference facilities for professionals; the facility would provide in-service training and an outreach service to support teachers in schools.

The Centre was officially launched in September 2004 following the purchase of a site and the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the DES in Ireland to jointly fund the Centre. It became operational in 2007.

The Middletown Centre acts as a second level specialist service provider, responding to referrals from local providers of autism services and working in partnership with other organisations to deliver its services.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Progress made

In 2010 the Comptroller and Auditor General concluded that the Centre was unable to deliver the full range of services that had originally been planned, and that key services including working directly with young people with ASD were not being achieved. It also indicated that it was unlikely that the position would change in the short-term.<sup>7</sup>

The report noted that the Board of the Centre was committed to the development of the Centre through the delivery of the four key services, but that it had raised concerns regarding its ability to do so if the anticipated levels of funding are not made available. It also highlighted concerns that the Centre would soon be at full capacity. The following table provides an overview of the services planned and progress reported.

**Table 1: Overview of planned services and progress made**

Area	Planned services	Delivery
Training, advice and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training, advice and guidance on autism to families and carers of children and young people referred to the Centre and to the professionals who work with them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to the Department, training has been provided to over 9,000 professionals and almost 4,000 parents</li> <li>• An outreach service offering trans-disciplinary assessment has supported 172 children and a further 362 children 'by helping whole schools develop an ASD competent environment'</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2009) *Financial Auditing and Reporting 2007-2008: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland* Belfast: The Stationery Office

<sup>7</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2010) *Financial Auditing and Reporting: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland 2009* Belfast: The Stationery Office

Area	Planned services	Delivery
Research and information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct and commission research to further develop an understanding of autism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two cross-border research projects underway and six research summaries published</li> <li>The Centre has indicated that plans for research have been restricted due to funding</li> </ul>
Educational assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The service would provide specialist Centre-based two-day multi-disciplinary educational assessment each year for a planned 180 children with autism experiencing difficulties within their educational setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service has not yet commenced (dependent on the planned building programme)</li> </ul>
Learning and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The service would devise individualised learning support programmes to meet the identified needs for a planned 140 children annually. The programmes would be delivered on a five day basis over a five week period for each child or young person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service has not yet commenced (dependent on the planned building programme)</li> </ul>

Source: Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2009 and 2010 reports) *Financial Auditing and Reporting: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland Belfast: The Stationery Office* and Information provided by the Department in response to a request, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2012

### Staffing

It was intended that the Centre would have 74 staff members once fully operational in 2010-11. The Comptroller and Auditor General reported in 2010 that there were 18.3 full-time equivalent posts. It had been anticipated that the Centre, when fully operational, would incur £3.5m revenue expenditure annually.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2010) *Financial Auditing and Reporting: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland 2009* Belfast: The Stationery Office

## Building project

The recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General highlighted the issue of the planned new building programme at the Centre. The programme originally was due to be completed in 2010.<sup>9</sup>

The report noted that in 2009 the then Department of Education and Science in Ireland announced that it was not able to provide the funding required to expand the Centre as planned. While this restriction was lifted at the end of that year, the report stated that capital funding from DES was limited to funding for maintenance work required to fulfil health and safety requirements. The building project has not yet commenced.

## 5 Current issues

A range of concerns have been highlighted about the Centre. A number of these are considered in the following paragraphs. Other concerns cited include the level of funding required, the location of the centre and the residential model of planned autism assessment provision.<sup>10</sup>

### Financial uncertainty

The Comptroller and Auditor General has concluded that uncertainty is facing the Centre and that it is unable to provide the full range of services that were originally planned.

### Value for money

The Comptroller and Auditor General in 2009 highlighted that the establishment of the Centre represented a 'significant increase' in resources, stating that this reflected an '*expectation that the project will deliver significant benefits.*'<sup>11</sup>

A 2010 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General stated that it was a 'matter of some urgency' that robust benchmarking be put into place to allow comparison of outputs and outcomes to inform the extent to which value for money is being achieved in the current provision. In particular, it stated that:

*"DE should be increasingly mindful of the need to demonstrate clearly that value for money is being achieved with this project."*

The following table summarises the total annual expenditure by the Department of Education here on the Middletown Centre since 2002 (an equivalent amount has been contributed by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland). The total cost of the

<sup>9</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2010) *Financial Auditing and Reporting: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland 2009* Belfast: The Stationery Office

<sup>10</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2009) *Financial Auditing and Reporting 2007-2008: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland* Belfast: The Stationery Office

<sup>11</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland (2009) *Financial Auditing and Reporting 2007-2008: General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland* Belfast: The Stationery Office

annual expenditure figures by the Department since 2002 is almost £5.7m. The expenditure in 2004/05 included £1.5m in capital costs relating to the purchase of the site.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 2: total annual expenditure by the Department on the Middletown Centre**

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12*
£55,069	£181,576	£1,729,195	£103,962	£139,233	£564,702	£784,369	£737,859	£807,113	£570,000

\*Year to date

Source: Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr Stephen Moutray MLA, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2012 and Information provided by the Department in response to a request, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2012

It was originally expected that once fully operational, the Centre would incur an annual expenditure of £3.5m (divided between the two Departments). This expenditure was anticipated when the building and refurbishment programme was complete.

### **Future of the building project**

Following the Irish Government's decision to lift its pause on funding for the Centre, it was announced that further progress on the building project would be based on a phased multi-annual plan to be agreed between the Department, DES and the Centre. It was stated that the plan would take into account best practice internationally, as well as the development of services for autism in both jurisdictions since the establishment of the Centre.<sup>13</sup>

The Department has stated that it has mapped the development of autism services in consultation with the Education and Library Boards and that it has met with officials from DES and the Board of Directors of the Centre to help inform and progress the plan. It is anticipated that the plan will be provided to the Education Ministers 'in the coming weeks' to allow them to take decisions on the way forward.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Minister for Education response to an Assembly Question by Mr John McCallister MLA, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2010

<sup>13</sup> Information provided by the Department in response to a request, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2012

<sup>14</sup> As above