

Background and Experience

I have worked extensively within the SEN landscape in Northern Ireland, both in alternative education and mainstream settings. For five years, I served within the Education Authority's EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) service, supporting Key Stage 4 pupils excluded from mainstream education due to complex social, emotional, and behavioural needs. More recently, I have transitioned into a mainstream secondary school environment, working in a setting with the highest number of SPIMs (Special Provision in Mainstream Schools) classrooms in Northern Ireland.

This dual perspective has given me a unique insight into the evolving SEN provision and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Key Questions and Concerns

1. What is the long-term plan for EOTAS centres as SPIMs provision expands?

SPIMs classrooms are increasingly being embedded within mainstream schools, offering tailored support to statemented pupils. This shift raises critical questions about the future role and sustainability of EOTAS centres.

In my experience, EOTAS centres are often:

- **Overstaffed and under-attended**, with pupils averaging less than 4 hours of attendance per day.
- **Creatively recorded in registers**, which raises concerns about accountability and transparency.
- **Providing diluted curricula**, with little expectation for GCSE completion.
- **Offering high staff-to-pupil ratios (1:2)**, yet struggling to deliver outcomes comparable to SPIMs classrooms.

Despite commendable efforts in relationship-building, the value for money in EOTAS centres is questionable. Extravagant reward systems—such as weekly McDonald's orders exceeding £100 for minimal attendance—contrast sharply with the resource constraints faced by mainstream schools, where basic supplies like paper for exams are unaffordable.

2. Comparative Effectiveness: SPIMs vs EOTAS

Having worked in both systems, I can confidently state that the **needs of pupils in SPIMs are no different** from those in EOTAS. Yet, SPIMs teachers manage up to 12 pupils per lesson, adapting and differentiating effectively with fewer resources and less support.

This begs the question: **Why are EOTAS centres, with significantly more staff and resources, unable to achieve similar outcomes?**

If mainstream teachers can successfully deliver SPIMs provision, perhaps the model of standalone EOTAS centres is outdated.

3. A Proposed Solution: School-Based EOTAS Provision

A more sustainable and impactful model could involve **embedding EOTAS-style provision within mainstream schools**.

For example:

- One experienced EOTAS teacher could operate a dedicated classroom or mobile unit within a secondary school.
- Supported by two classroom assistants, they could work with 8–12 pupils.
- This would drastically reduce costs related to staffing, heating, and emergency transport (e.g., taxis).
- Pupils would remain connected to their local school community, reducing isolation and improving attendance.

This **SEBW-specific SPIMs model** (Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Wellbeing) would retain the strengths of EOTAS while integrating pupils into a more inclusive and accountable environment.

Curriculum Reform: Enhancement Curriculum for SEN Learners

From my curriculum review, I strongly advocate for an **enhancement curriculum** tailored to SEN learners, particularly those affected by ACEs, trauma, and nurture needs.

Key features should include:

- **Functional digital skills** taught through portfolio-based qualifications like OCN.

- **Vocational pathways** that blend practical life skills with career-focused learning.
- **Communication and numeracy qualifications** embedded into the curriculum.
- **Removal of linear exam pressure**, replaced with continuous assessment.

This curriculum would combine the best of the preventative and national models, offering meaningful qualifications and life skills to young people who are often marginalised by traditional academic routes.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland's SEN provision is at a crossroads. The expansion of SPIMs offers a promising alternative to traditional EOTAS centres, but strategic planning is needed to ensure coherence, cost-effectiveness, and quality of education. By embedding EOTAS-style support within mainstream schools and reforming the curriculum to meet the real needs of vulnerable learners, we can build a more inclusive and impactful system.

I welcome further dialogue on this issue and am committed to supporting meaningful change for the young people we serve.



Sent from my iPhone