



CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

**Opening Statement
for the meeting of the
Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,
Integration and Youth**

3 October 2023

Speaking notes for oral presentation

Good afternoon, I am Stephen Douthart the new Chief Executive Officer of Middletown Centre for Autism. I thank the Chairperson and members of the Joint Committee for this invitation to attend today. I am joined today by two colleagues from the Centre's Executive Team: Dr Fiona McCaffrey Head of Research and Development and Mrs Jill McCanney Interim Head of Learning Support and Assessment.

We very much welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee on this important Private Members Bill - Autism Spectrum Disorder Bill 2017.

At the outset I think it is pertinent to briefly discuss the mandate for Middletown Centre for Autism.

The Centre, established in April 2007, operates under the Good Friday Agreement's education policy initiatives. It serves autistic children, parents, families, and education professionals across Northern Ireland and Ireland, focusing on children whom require additional input to first tier services.

We collaborate with Statutory and Voluntary providers to enhance autism services in the Education Sectors of Ireland and NI. We are a Non-Statutory Service Provider established as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Orders 1986 to 1990.

Our Board of Directors comprises of nominees from both Departments of Education in Ireland and Northern Ireland, with the Chair rotating between the respective Ministers of Education every three years. We are funded equally by both departments, and our operations adhere to set parameters outlined in our management statement and financial memorandum. Please note that we cannot express opinions on the merits or objectives of the policies of either Department.

While our role is very much about supporting children, parents and professionals, we are not mandated to provide advocacy.

We offer advice and guidance to the departments on where we see that our services can be most effective.

On the passing of the Bill, the Centre will engage with the Department of Education on the practicalities and appropriateness of Middletown:

- Providing advice and guidance to the government on the implementation of the Bill's provisions.
- Working in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to develop and deliver training on autism for professionals who may be involved in implementing the Bill.
- Sharing current best practice from Middletown on our own transdisciplinary approaches.
- Providing direct support to autistic people and their families who are affected by the Bill's provisions in a Tier Two referral capacity for complex needs.
- Providing leadership on the creation and development of new educational programs in neurodiversity awareness for students and developing a training program for teachers on how to create autism-competent classrooms.
- Working in partnerships with other organisations and stakeholders to provide guidance and support to autistic people transitioning from school to work or from school to independent living.

- Working in partnerships with other organisations and stakeholders to provide a unified strategy of training and support workshops made available to autistic young people, parents, and professionals.
- Conducting research on the impact of the ASD Bill on the lives of autistic children and young people and their families, to support high calibre best practices.

Middletown would welcome any new provision which would improve access to assessments and any consequential support services.

We also welcome and would very much support any provision whether legislative or administrative which would improve the lives of autistic children or young people. In particular I would welcome any provision which would support the delivery and coordination of services and supports for autistic children.

I acknowledge the significant advances made over the past decade in the delivery of educational supports and services in Ireland.

Middletown will continue to play its part in the provision of supports for autistic children in line with the requirements of the Sponsoring Departments whether or not that is supported by a new strategy.

Middletown stands ready to embrace any new role it may receive should the bill pass into law. We will support the work of the Government in any way we can to ensure the interests and welfare of autistic children are best served.

I will now hand you over to my colleague Dr Fiona McCaffrey.

Middletown Centre for Autism takes a neurodiversity-informed and autism-firming approach to our practices.

A neuroaffirming approach acknowledges that all students have a unique set of strengths and challenges, which in turn empowers school staff to provide support when they see a need. This means that they may be able to analyse and act upon needs long before a child is given a formal diagnosis. A neuroaffirming approach is truly child-centred and allows for an immediate and shifting response to the needs of each child. Neuroaffirming approaches that tackle stigma and support neurodivergent ways of being are associated with positive self-regard.

School staff who confidently understand a neuroaffirming approach can be empowered to champion their own expertise in recognising, understanding and supporting their student's needs.

Middletown Centre is an established leader in fostering the development of neuroaffirming practices in schools. The Centre has built a versatile training infrastructure that provides parents and educational professional with a choice of online, face to face, realtime and recorded sessions. All are designed to enhance access to education through fostering shared understandings across home and school. This approach has been successful across Ireland, Northern Ireland and worldwide with 95,000 training places offered to teachers since training commenced in 2007. The Centre's training model is rooted in evidence-based practices and is consistently evaluated as excellent. The needs of autistic pupils and students are at the forefront of the Centre's training delivery and as such it has the infrastructure, expertise and evidence base to enhance and empower school communities and increase access to education.

The Centre's Research and Information division complements the work of its training division by making research accessible for a diverse population of users. Promoting neurodiversity and using the principles of Universal Design for Learning the Centre produces a podcast, accessible research summaries, short videos and practical resources. The Centre's outreach through its research and development is evolving with and informed by the needs of communities and schools.

I will now hand you over to my colleague Jill McCanney.

Middletown's Learning Support and Assessment Service (LSA)

The Learning Support and Assessment (LSA) Service is the division within the Centre which provides direct assessment and support for autistic children and young people referred by the Steering Group in Ireland, and the Education Authority in Northern Ireland.

The Centre has developed an inclusive "wraparound" model of support for autistic children and young people which integrates support in the school, support in the home, and support in the community, to ensure that the autistic child or young person has access to education and maximises the benefits from their education placement.

The LSA Service works alongside the Research and Development Service to produce a cohesive approach to neuroaffirmative practices in schools, homes and all aspects of the community in which the young person lives.

The LSA division already fulfils many of the points set out in the ASD Bill in the following ways:

- Transdisciplinary assessment and support for autistic children and young people, including access to educational specialists, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. The Centre also provides support from other service providers as required, including educational psychologists, clinical psychologists, music therapists and art therapists.
- Recommendations from all professionals are integrated into a single Learning Support Plan, addressing both educational and health needs across school, home and community settings.
- The LSA service delivers a person-centred model, ensuring the wishes of the young person are communicated as part of the assessment process, and that these remain integral to the support plan developed for the young person.
- The needs of the family are prioritised throughout the 10-month period of support through weekly home visits, bespoke training for core and extended family and direct support for siblings.
- The LSA team support the young person and their family in accessing community services, including respite care and local facilities. Throughout the 10-month period of support, the LSA team establishes links with services relevant to the young person, striving towards an ongoing network of support, from education, health and voluntary sectors.
- Outcomes are measured throughout the 10-month referral period, collating feedback from the young person, their family, school and other professionals. This then contributes into the body of evidence used to develop models of best practice for autistic children and young people.

With the support of the Department of Education, Middletown Centre for Autism is uniquely positioned to share best practice with relevant stakeholders following the passing of the bill.

We now welcome questions.