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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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**Department of Education
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an AEP Inspection

**Secondary Pupil Support Service,
The Link Centre, Belfast**

Inspected: March 2007

CONTENTS

Section		Page
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	1
3.	QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	2
4.	LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	2
5.	OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS	3
6.	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT	4
7.	CONCLUSION	5

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Secondary Pupil Support Service (SPSS) is situated at the Link Centre (Centre), Barrack Street, Belfast. It was opened in 1999 as a secondary pupil referral unit and support service for schools within the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) area.

1.2 The focus of the inspection was on the quality of the provision and the arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection. At the time of the inspection, the staff were supporting 22 Belfast schools and over 350 pupils with ten pupils referred to the Centre on a part-time basis.

1.3 Prior to the inspection, two forms of questionnaire were issued, one to the parents/carers of pupils who are attending the Centre and one to the parents/carers of the pupils who are being supported in schools. These were both confidential questionnaires seeking their views on the effectiveness of the provision. Of the questionnaires issued to parents, 14 were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and contained written comments. The responses were highly complimentary of the Centre and of the support provided for the young people. In addition, six individual parents met with members of the inspection team to express their gratitude for the support and to indicate the success which had been achieved. The pupils spoke highly of the Centre and of the staff for whom they expressed high regard. Feedback from all of the schools was highly positive and very complimentary about the work of the SPSS and for many they viewed the provision as essential in assisting them in supporting individual pupils and, increasingly, in helping teachers to become more skilled, confident and self-sufficient in dealing with challenging pupils.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 The Centre's provision is very good. The inspection found strengths in many aspects of the provision with minor areas for improvement, which need to be addressed. The majority of the young people make good progress in managing their difficulties while in the Centre and, in addition those pupils who obtain support in their own schools make good progress.

2.2 The inspection findings indicate the following achievements and standards:

- the strong commitment of the staff to providing a nurturing and therapeutic environment for the young people who attend the Centre;
- the innovative and imaginative approaches used in working with the pupils;
- the opportunities for the young people to develop their self-esteem and social skills;
- the high level of appreciation and endorsement of the parents for the successful work of the Centre in supporting their children;
- the good motivation of the young people in engaging with the staff; and

- the high quality of the accommodation and the attractive decor, resources and the layout of the rooms which enable small group and individual teaching to take place within a secure and open environment.

3. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 Teaching and learning are consistently good and, at times, outstanding both in the Centre and in the schools in which the staff work. The work is characterised by careful attention to the individual needs of the young people.

3.2 The main strengths of the quality of provision for learning are:

- the excellent working relationships at all levels;
- the mutual respect between the staff and the pupils;
- the quality of the teaching;
- the outstanding group work sessions;
- the high quality of the accommodation and resources;
- the staff's calm approach to lessons, which promotes a relaxed atmosphere;
- the sensitive approach of the staff and their deep understanding and respect for the pupils with whom they work;
- the young people, who attend regularly, show enthusiasm for the programmes provided and make good progress; and
- the well organised and effective daily routines, including the shared breakfast, break and lunch times which offer opportunities for building good working relationships, and for providing counselling support and encouragement.

3.3 In addition, there are arrangements in place for pastoral care and child protection which ensure that all staff are appropriately vetted and that the young people's self-esteem and self-confidence are promoted. It is important, however, that the existing protocols should be reviewed to take account of the relevant DE Circulars. It is also important that the SPSS ensures that there is a review of training needs for all staff in relation to child protection and in particular those staff working on a one-to-one basis with pupils.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 The quality of leadership and management of the SPSS is good. A collegial process of decision-making and strong team-work are major strengths in the management of the SPSS. In addition, staff expertise and interests are developed, promoted and fully utilised. A key strength of the SPSS is the responsive and flexible response to meeting the needs of the

pupils and the demands of the schools that they serve. The SPSS is a generous 'Learning Community' in which all of the staff strive for improvement, willingly share their knowledge and expertise with one another and increasingly and successfully, with their colleagues in schools.

4.2 The main strengths of the leadership and management of the SPSS are:

- the dedication of the Head of Service to the work of the SPSS; further, his pastoral care for the staff and strong commitment to the welfare of the pupils whom they strive to support;
- despite the significant cutbacks and uncertainty, staff morale is high;
- the high level of team-work and the sharing of expertise;
- the effective working relationships with educational psychologists from the BELB;
- the commitment to maintaining effective and very regular links with parents/carers and the strong partnerships which have developed;
- the strong commitment to staff development;
- the high quality of the communication within the SPSS including the regular review and briefing meetings;
- the excellent levels of co-operation amongst all the staff which is clearly promoted by the value which the Head of Service places on their work;
- the active efforts of the Head of Service and the staff to promote a high level of innovation and achievement for themselves, the schools and the pupils; and
- the quality of the documentation including the detailed policies, support materials and records and the developing culture of self-reflection and evaluation.

4.3 The SPSS has identified areas for improvement, which this inspection endorses.

5. **OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS**

5.1 The overall effectiveness of the SPSS indicates many strength in aspects of the provision.

5.2 The main strengths are:

- the excellent working relationships at all levels;
- the mutual respect between the staff and the pupils;

- the nurturing and therapeutic environment for the young people who attend the Centre;
- the high quality of accommodation and resources;
- the responsive and flexible response to meeting the needs of the pupils;
- the progress made by the young people in terms of their self-confidence and ability to cope with their difficulties;
- the high level of appreciation and endorsement of the parents for the successful work of the SPSS in supporting their children;
- the highly positive feedback from schools;
- the strong commitment to staff development;
- the high level of team-work and the sharing of expertise both internally and externally;
- the dedication of the Head of Service to the work of the SPSS; and
- the quality of teaching and the outstanding group work sessions and the positive outcomes for most of the young people.

6. **AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

6.1 In order to improve the standards further, the SPSS should:

- develop a more strategic role in its management structure;
- continue to develop its facilitating and training role in schools working to ensure that all teaching staff are aware and supportive of the work that they do in the best interest of the pupils;
- develop more fully, with external support from the BELB, more rigour in producing successful criteria and in recording, collecting and collating the quantitative and qualitative evidence from all of their stakeholders of the outcomes of their work, in order that they may demonstrate and celebrate their achievements; and
- ensure that the management board is more actively involved in monitoring and supporting its work.

7. **CONCLUSION**

7.1 In the areas inspected, the SPSS has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified minor areas for improvement which the organisation has the capacity to address.

7.2 The organisation's progress on the areas for improvement will be monitored by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

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