Tír na nÓg Unit for Autism Procedures and Practice
Unit for Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - Tír na nÓg

The Special Autism Unit named Tír na nÓg was established in September 2007. The Unit is funded and resourced by the Department of Education and Skills.

Support Services

Clinical support and services are provided to the pupils depending on the county they are resident in; e.g. children residing in Kildare receive support from North Kildare Network Disability Team (NKNDT); children from Meath receive it from Enable Ireland etc. The school will support the provision of HSE support services both from within and outside Kildare. The school will aim to implement all recommendations made by the HSE qualified professionals, in regard to an individual pupil, through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process, with due regard to the resources available to the school.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the ASD Unit is to provide a supportive, caring learning environment which facilitates the nurturing of each pupil’s full educational potential. The pursuit of this aim informs all of the planning processes and activities which occur in our school. With a team of dedicated teachers and special needs assistants, the school provides individual programmes in small classes of no more than six pupils, catering for the uniqueness of each pupil’s condition, personality and needs. The Principal, teachers, support staff and parents are partners in the child’s education, with co-operation and communication between home and school being of vital importance in the educational process.

Our primary objectives are:

- To provide the highest quality, appropriate educational service to each child in Tír na nÓg in a caring and supportive environment within the requirements of all recent legislation pertaining to Special Needs Education.
- To strive towards the integration of children from Tír na nÓg into mainstream education, having regard for the levels of disability, available resources and suitability for such integration.
- To enhance the communicative and social skills of the children in Tír na nÓg.
- To continue to develop Tír na nÓg as a centre of excellence for the delivery of an educational service to pupils with autism.

Routines and General Information:

1. The school day for the Special Autism Classes runs from 9.15 am to 2 pm for those children with less than two full years completed at primary school or who have not yet reached 7 years of age. After this the school day runs from 9.15 am to 3 pm. These times are governed by the Department of Education and
Skills’ “Rules for National Schools”, having been fully agreed with the Departments’ Inspectorate.

2. Children are not permitted to enter the school building before 9.05 am.

3. There is a 15 minute break at 10.55 am and lunch is from 12.20 pm to 1 pm. Pupils in the ASD Unit may be provided with a 'Buddy' from one of the senior classes. Buddies are given general training by an ASD teacher regarding their behaviour with a pupil.

4. The children are dismissed at either 2 pm or 3 pm depending on (1) above. Pupils should be collected from school from the school front lobby. Tír na nÓg staff will escort pupils outside and formally hand them over to the parent at the designated area. Pupils who avail of DES transport will be escorted to the bus by a member of Tír na nÓg staff.

5. A synopsis of the child’s daily activities/attainments is communicated in writing to parents daily by means of a Communication Copy/Diary. Regular home/school communication is an essential element of the education of a pupil with autism. Parents should check the pupil’s Communication Copy every evening and report all applicable useful information in the copy to the teacher. It can occur that a circumstance may arise in which the teacher is unable to communicate via the copy on a particular afternoon. In such an event, where the teacher deems the information to be critical, it will be communicated on the day via other media.

6. All Clocha Rince NS policy applies to Tír na nÓg Unit unless otherwise indicated.

7. All Clocha Rince NS circulars apply to Tír na nÓg unless otherwise indicated.

8. As per mainstream schooling, parents are expected to contribute towards the cost of books, stationery and extra-curricular activities as they arise.

9. Parents of pupils in Tír na nÓg are welcome to meet in the school staff-room every Tuesday morning from 9.15 am to 10.45 am for coffee and a chat. The school is committed to continuing the positive open relationship with all parents. This coffee morning will be used by the Principal to occasionally meet with parents. It is also an opportunity for parents to network, support each other and plan further opportunities and activities for our pupils in Tír na nÓg. This is not a forum to discuss individual issues specific to any pupil in Tír na nÓg. Parents wishing to discuss a specific issue relating to their child should do so with their child’s class teacher.

**Communication/Meetings with Parents of Tír na nÓg:**

Consistent and regular communication between home and school is viewed as essential in the effective delivery of a quality educational experience to every pupil in Tír na nÓg.

- Staff and parents should use the Communication Copy every day to report pupil specific issues home and to the school
• The school will report all applicable items to parents as per the school’s policy on ‘Communication with Parents’, through the use of newsletters, circulars, notes, school texting system and the school website.
• Each parent will meet with the pupil’s class teacher by the end of September and at the beginning of February to develop or review the pupil’s IEP/Behavioural Plan. Other IEP meetings may be arranged as required. Before the IEP meeting, parents will complete a pre-IEP form to establish an agenda for the meeting, which will ensure that parents can contribute to the agenda and allow the teacher to prepare a contribution to any issue/concern raised.
• The teacher and/or parent may request a meeting at any stage during the year to discuss their child’s development.
• Multi-disciplinary team meetings will be organised where applicable and will be attended by the Principal, or a person delegated to represent the Principal, and the teacher. SNA’s may be requested to attend such meetings.
• Parents should make an appointment with their child’s class teacher if there is a requirement to discuss any issues relating to their child’s development. Any applicable information will be communicated to the Principal at the monthly team meetings or earlier if required.

Tír na nÓg Meetings

Tír na nÓg team meetings will take place once a month. The Principal will meet with some or all of the ASD Unit staff to discuss issues regarding procedure and organisation of the Unit. IEP’s will also be reviewed on a regular basis at these meetings to ensure the plans are being implemented effectively and to discuss all issues arising. Other members of staff may be invited to attend the team meetings as appropriate. Outside services may also be invited to attend the team meetings if required.

School Attendance

Under the Education Welfare Act each child is obliged by law to attend school every day on which the school is in operation. The school authorities are obliged to notify the Educational Welfare Services (Tusla) when a child is absent for more than 20 days or if a reasonable excuse has not been provided for an absence by the child’s parents. Please see the school’s ‘Attendance Policy’.

Absences

Parents are asked to ring the school if their child is absent. This must be followed by a separate note confirming same or by a note written in the child’s home/school diary. If a child needs to leave early a written note must be sent to the class teacher or the school should be informed by phone.
**Personal Care**

Everybody works best when they are clean and comfortable. Hygiene is a whole school issue. With this in mind we encourage parents to:

2. Check hair regularly for lice.
3. Send in a change of clothes and any personal hygiene items necessary.

**Illness**

Every child’s health is important to us. In order to ensure the highest standard of medical care, the following procedures have been agreed:

1. Home is the best place for a sick child.
2. Wounds should be properly dressed.
3. Please notify us of any medication your child may be taking.
4. As a rule teachers and SNAs may not administer medication. Please contact the Principal for arrangements in this regard.

**Independence/Living Skills**

As promoting independence is a primary aim in Tír na nÓg, social outings and tasks to work on areas such as dressing and eating are a priority. Children are encouraged to participate in the process of preparing food as well as tasting new foodstuffs. Staff will not assist children in tasks where it is known they can perform these independently, such as putting on shoes etc. Children who have not yet learned these skills will be encouraged to develop them as a priority. Parents will be asked to cover the cost of any outings the classes may embark on, if applicable.

**Washing, Dressing and Toileting**

At times it may be necessary to assist a child with washing, dressing or toileting needs. In these circumstances, two members of staff will assist. Where it is only possible for one member of staff to be present, the door will remain open.

**Homework**

Children are expected to do a reasonable amount of homework every night, except on Fridays. This homework should be signed either at home or the carers at respite, where applicable. In most circumstances this will involve giving some time to hearing reading, checking spellings, handwriting and helping with drawing or maths.

**Information and Communication Technology**

All the children have access to computers whether in the Autism Unit, mainstream classroom or the computer room. The school will also consider the need for assistive technology if it arises and if resources allow. Applications for assistive technology are
dealt with by the area Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO). The pupils will also have access to the visiting computer teacher upon payment of appropriate annual fee.

The school is extremely pro-active in developing resources in digital and interactive education. Our objective is to equip Tír na nÓg, financial resources dependent, with interactive and digital technological devices which will benefit pupils' educational experience.

**July Education Provision**

The pupils in the Autism Unit can avail of a special July Programme under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills. Parents are invited to allow their children to participate in this programme which commences the Monday immediately after school closure in June. Participation in this programme is not mandatory and the same level of care and attention is provided as during the normal school year.

The school will make every effort to provide this programme to parents. The provision or non-provision is entirely a matter for the Board of Management.

It is optional for the school staff to participate in the programme. Where there are staffing deficits the school will employ the services of other qualified teachers and/or SNAs. The employment of staff with experience of working with pupils with autism will be a priority. The appointment of outside staff for the JEP is a matter for the Board of Management.

The JEP programme is an extension of the school year. The pupils will experience a normal school week. However, there will be two trips per week outside the school and swimming will be part of the programme. Parents will be asked to meet the costs of these trips as is normal procedure throughout the school year.
Intervention Methods

There are many different educational interventions for children with autism. The primary methods that we draw upon within Tír na nÓg are:

- TEACCH: Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (Schopler and Mesibov, 1995).
- Floor Time (Greenspan)
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy and Frost, 1994)
- Sensory Integration
- Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA)
- Social Stories
- Marte Meo
- Music Integration

TEACCH

This approach is based on the principles of structured teaching that aims to use the child's visual strengths to help them understand what is required. The main strategies are

- Physical structure: how the environment is organised. Applied to the classroom, this means dividing the room into definite areas where specific activities take place. These include individual workstations, table for individual and/or group teacher/pupil work, play spaces etc.
- Daily schedules which support the child's understanding of what they are supposed to be doing now and what will be happening next.
- Work systems which visually explain what has to be done, how much has to be done and what will happen next.
- Visual instructions that communicate the job to be completed within any task (Jones, 2002; Jones & Jordan 2000)

Intensive Interaction/Floor Time

This programme is based on typical early childhood interaction techniques as used naturally between the parent and child which affirms the concept that two-way interaction can be rewarding and fun. It involves following the child's lead and affording meaning by imitating the child's chosen activity and building turn-taking routines around it (Cumine et al 2000; Nind & Newitt 1994, cited in Nind 1999). Joining in rather than interrupting an activity like lining up objects can afford the child and the adult some quality sharing that can be built into turn-taking thereby enhancing the relationship and affirming the adult as an accomplice in the difficult world of communication. Greenspan claims that the key to enhancing communication and socialisation lies in fostering meaningful and mutually beneficial interactions based on the natural motivations of the
child. The experience for the child in having shared control of the interaction with staff, who pitch the activity at his/her individual developmental level, can lead the way to the necessary social precursors to early communication i.e. eye-contact, shared focus, reciprocal turn taking, imitation and timing.

It is a priority in Tír na nÓg to maintain open channels of communication and to build relationships between staff and children through broad use of play. It is perhaps these very relationships that will enable meaningful learning now and in the future education of these children.

**PECS**

PECS teaches children to communicate through picture exchange as opposed to verbal exchange. The programme is individually assessed and built around the preferred activities of the individual child in order to facilitate spontaneity and a desire to communicate (Jones and Jordan 2000). It initially involves the exchange of a symbol card for the desired item and can progress to the construction of sentences and the use of these for commenting e.g. ‘I see...’. It is important not to over prompt and to avoid questions like ‘what do you want?’, which go against the intrinsic element of spontaneity (Baker & Webb 2001).

At any given time, there could be several children in Tír na nÓg using PECS, each at their own individual level.

**Sensory Integration**

Sensory integration exercises are integrated throughout the daily schedule to promote healthy sensory processing. This supports efficient:

- Intake of sensory messages from our bodies and surroundings
- Interpretation of these messages in the central nervous system
- Organisation of our purposeful responses

General activities include swinging, squashing, gross motor and fine motor movements, pulling, pushing, rocking, rolling, deep pressure exercises, listening to music etc.

Sensory integration is also an integral part of the child's sensory diets as devised by the Occupational Therapist based on individual assessments.

**Music Interaction**

Singing running commentary songs, which acknowledge and label what the child is doing, plays a part in our approach to language acquisition (providing the individual child likes music!). Gradually progressing to leaving out key words and phrases and giving the child opportunity to fill in the gap and express him/herself at his/her own level, also supports meaningful language development.
**Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA)**

Our approach has many behavioural elements including functional behaviour assessment, task analysis, teaching in small steps and rewarding appropriate responses and behaviours. However, ABA is not used as a single intense approach and instead is incorporated into a range of other intervention models.

**Marte Meo**

The Marte Meo programme for ASD is a developmental support programme which can be used in daily interaction moments. The central focus is to encourage the child to ‘use their own strength’ to advance and stimulate developmental process. Elements of this approach are key to our practice. These include labelling the child’s actions i.e. ‘You’re looking at…’, ‘You’re jumping up and down’ therefore ensuring that language modelling is attached to real and meaningful experiences and emotions of the child.

**Social Stories**

Personalised social stories are used to help teach a required behaviour, prepare children for new situations and applaud achievements. Staff consider the perspective of the child with ASD and develop a story describing a situation, skill or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives and common responses.

**Curriculum**

As in the mainstream school, the Revised Primary School Curriculum, 1999 and the New Language Curriculum 2015, are used in Tír na nÓg. This is adapted to suit the individual child and children may work on different subjects from different year groups depending on their developmental level. In addition to this, areas from the ABBLS and VB-MAPP curriculum guides are targeted as appropriate to include some or all of the following:

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Assessment

Informal assessment in Tír na nÓg is on-going and can include observation, teacher designed tasks as well as communicative and social interactions with the children. A number of formal assessments specific to children with ASD are used, as appropriate, depending on the needs of the individual child and may include ABBLS, VB-MAPP, PEP3 along with observation profiles on the typical impairments associated with autism: social and communication, behaviour and sensory. As the children progress through the school, they may also be assessed formally in curricular areas along with the mainstream children using tests such as Micra-T and Sigma-T, among others.

IEP Process

Individual Education Plans are developed for each child in consultation with the parents and the clinical team, where appropriate. They are drawn up by the end of September and January of each school year. Targets are set at the developmental level of each individual child under the headings of curricular subjects, speech and language, occupational therapy, social and behaviour. IEP's are reviewed on an on-going basis through informal consultation with parents and the clinical team and in the more formal format of IEP review meetings. There is also a review meeting every June.

Integration and Inclusion of Pupils from Tír na nÓg into a Mainstream Class

Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act) states:

"A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs is such that to do so would be inconsistent with:

(a) The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this act, or
(b) The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated."

The school promotes a policy of integration with age appropriate peers on a social level and ability appropriate on a curriculum level. It may not always be possible to integrate children in their age equivalent class due to the age profile of the children in the unit. It is however, envisaged that the children would receive the Sacraments with their appropriate peers.

The amount of integration/reverse integration that each child receives in Clocha Rince NS is collectively decided upon by those professionals who deal with the child daily i.e. teachers (both SEN teachers and mainstream), the Principal and support staff. The views of other interested parties, such as Psychologists, Occupational Therapists and Speech Therapists may also be taken into account. Parents will be consulted on an on-
going basis and their feedback will play an integral part in deciding upon the appropriate level of integration which ultimately will be the decision of the Board of Management.

**Curricular Integration**

Having adjusted on a social level, the child from Tír na nÓg will, on a phased basis, be introduced to areas of the curriculum appropriate to ability level. Initial opportunities for integration will be based on individual pupil's strengths and interests. The children form Tír na nÓg are also fully included in the school sports' day and drama and faith ceremonies. Ultimately, we aim to integrate pupils in mainstream classes without the need for an SNA to be present.

**Reverse Integration**

A policy of reverse integration extends to all classes. This involves:

1. The child from the Autism Unit being integrated for core curriculum subjects such as Maths and English initially through reverse integration whereby 3-4 children from the mainstream class are withdrawn to join the child in their more familiar environment. It is envisaged that this will, in the long term, lead to conventional integration in the mainstream class.

2. The level of integration into a mainstream class for a core curriculum subject will be on an individual basis only and will differ from child to child. The school will retain discretion as to particular children who should avail of core curriculum mainstream integration.

3. A time-tabled buddy system involving the children from Tír na nÓg and children from 5th and 6th Class is operational for all playtimes throughout the year. 'Buddies' will receive training by a Tír na nÓg teacher regarding autism and how to be a good 'buddy'.

4. Children from the unit will integrate into mainstream classes on the basis of ability rather than age appropriateness.

**Staff Roles**

**Principal:**

With reference to the EPSEN Act 2005, the role of the Principal entails:

1. Direct responsibility for coordinating an effective school approach to special needs education in the school.
2. Ensuring proper and effective classroom planning exists.
3. Ensuring effective IEP's are developed and implemented in their entirety.
4. Responsibility for the provision of in-service training and adequate resourcing.
5. Monitoring the effectiveness of the policy and making relevant adjustments.
6. Liaising with outside agencies, where applicable to the role.
7. Chair the monthly meetings with the Tír na nÓg team and the SNAs.

**Tír na nÓg Teachers**

1. Will identify the appropriate curriculum area the child in the unit should experience.
2. Directing the work of the SNAs.
3. Liaising with parents and outside agencies.
4. Collaborate and consult with mainstream class teachers and the Support Teacher team in setting Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant short term and long term targets.
5. Assume responsibility for an on-going IEP in consultation with the relevant support services, parents and the Principal. The teacher will formulate an IEP before the end of September, which will be in place until the end of January. An IEP review will be conducted during January so that a new IEP will be in place from February until the end of the school year. The teacher is responsible for arranging IEP meetings with parents.
6. Assume responsibility for arranging review meetings as required.
7. Assume responsibility for arranging an End of Year review/debriefing meeting with parents which must be held within the last two weeks of the normal school year.
8. Attend the monthly Tír na nÓg team meetings.

**Class Teachers**

1. Will differentiate teaching programmes to meet the needs of the child from Tír na nÓg.
2. Provide a suitable seating arrangement in the mainstream setting.
3. Collaborate with the Tír na nÓg teacher and the SNA.
4. Provide feedback on progress.
5. Contribute to an IEP.

**Special Needs Assistant:**

Each ASD class will be allocated a number of SNA’s by the area SENO. Generally, the SNA’s are allocated to the school by the Department of Education and Skills. They are not assigned to any one child and there is scope in their job specification to move between classes when the need arises.

1. Assist the class teacher with the specific goals and targets set down in the child’s IEP.
2. Provide for the care needs of the child in an inclusive setting where access to the curriculum is prioritised.
3. Attend the monthly Tír na nÓg meetings when requested.
**Staff Development**

In-service staff development will be provided regularly by a suitably qualified practitioner or by the Special Education Support Service (SESS). The on-going professional development of Tír na nÓg staff is an integral factor in developing Tír na nÓg as a centre of excellence. In order to facilitate the delivery of this training, it may be necessary on some occasions to finish classes early in the day. Parents will be informed in plenty of time of any change in the school day.

**Staff Allocation**

Staff will be allocated to the unit as per the school’s ‘Staff Allocation Policy’. Teachers allocated to the unit will spend a minimum term of two years as per this policy. They will be provided with appropriate training and support.

**Staff Absences**

In the event that a member of Tír na nÓg is absent a substitute will be employed. It is policy to make every effort to employ a regular teacher/SNA substitute who will become familiar to the pupils in the unit and vice versa. However, we are also aware that this will not always be possible. In the event that a suitable substitute cannot be employed, a member of the mainstream Special Education team/SNAs will cover the unit with the substitute being placed in their position. When a staff’s absence is expected, the pupils will receive advance notice and adequate preparation will be provided for the substitute. The parents will receive advance notice via the communication diary/copy.

**Behavioural Management**

Please refer to ‘Tír na nÓg Positive Support Procedures’.

**Code of Behaviour & Discipline and Anti-Bullying Policy**

Please refer to ‘Clocha Rince NS Code of Behaviour & Discipline and Anti-Bullying Policy’. This policy applies to all pupils in Clocha Rince NS which includes the pupils attending Tír na nÓg. Due consideration is made of a child's special need when applying the code.