



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



School	Knockevin Special School 33 Racecourse Hill Downpatrick BT30 6PU
Head/Principal	Ms Sara Liddell
IQM Lead	Mr Aaron Davis
Date of Review	7th May 2026
Assessor	Ms Fiona Robinson

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group	Ferrero Roche
Ambassador	Kevin O'Neill
Next Meeting	tbc
Meeting Focus	

Cluster Attendance

Term	Date	Attendance
Autumn 2025	20 th October 2025	Yes
Spring 2026	29 th January 2026	Yes
Summer 2026	12 th March 2026	Yes



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



The Impact of the Cluster Group

The cluster group continues to be a highly valuable and effective partnership and Knockevin School demonstrates a strong commitment to both participating in and contributing to its development. In particular, the Principal and Inclusion Lead have worked with another school around developing nurture provision. This collaborative work has been especially beneficial in supporting the school as it develops and strengthens its own approach to a nurture curriculum. There has also been valuable collaborative work focused on the development of Circle Time and the ways in which it can support pupils' social and emotional development. In addition, the school is thoughtfully exploring ways to further embed pupil voice within its practice, drawing inspiration from a number of highly effective ideas and approaches shared through the cluster network.

The cluster group has benefitted from Knockevin School hosting in the Roots Café. This was an excellent opportunity for leaders and staff to show what inclusion can look like for young people with complex needs. Feedback was excellent.

Evidence

Meetings with:

- Principal
- Vice Principal
- Head of Lcale Department/Literacy coordinator
- Meeting with a parent
- Head of Department/Head of Numeracy/Head of Assessment
- Meeting with Speech and Language Therapist
- Owl Class teacher/What a Hoot Café Lead/ICT coordinator
- Meeting with Chair of Governors

Additional Activities:

- Powerpoint presentations from the Principal and Vice Principal
- Document outlining the school's vision, ethos, and values along with the School Development Plan
- School Website
- Visit to What a Hoot Café
- Tour of school, learning walk and lesson observations



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



Evaluation of Annual Progress towards the Flagship Project

Project Title: Roots Cafe - providing work experience opportunities to pupils with severe, profound, and multiple learning difficulties in preparation for leaving school

During my visit to Knockevin School, I was able to hear about the success of the Café from a number of staff members. Whilst I wasn't able to see Roots Café in action as I was on a different site, it is clear from the evidence I saw and the staff whom I spoke to that this project is a complete success. The passion displayed by the Principal to give pupils the opportunity to grow their skills in a workplace environment has to be applauded. Pupils are challenged to come out of their comfort zones and take part in activities that are entirely new to them. They are thriving. The Café has afforded pupils to try all aspects of Café life. The local community has embraced the Café, and it is full every week with a range of local people. One tangible impact has been that this Café has given five pupils the opportunity to work in two local cafés.

Whilst I didn't visit Roots Café, I was, however, able to sample the delights of the What a Hoot Café, set up on the Knockevin site following the success of Roots Café, this Café being a key positive impact of the first Cafe. This second Café highlights how inspirational Roots Café is as staff and pupils on this site were inspired to open a second Café. The skills shown by pupils during my visit to this Café are a real testament to the dedication and hard work of all staff. I felt emotional as I was greeted, sat at my table, given my menu, had my order taken and was served with such a degree of professionalism. It was astounding. Pupils worked hard on their communication skills and were proud of their achievements. I had what I can only describe as the loveliest of sausage rolls and a perfect cuppa. This Café has given the younger pupils the opportunity to develop their skills.

Developing Sustainable Work Experience Through Roots Café

The school set out to create long-term, sustainable work experience opportunities for senior pupils that would support the development of life skills and preparation for post-19 provision. This has been achieved very successfully through the continued development of Roots Café. The Café has become well established within the local community through effective promotion using flyers, posters, newsletters, social media, and fundraising events. As a result, visitor numbers have increased significantly, including many visitors who are not directly connected to the school. The school has also widened participation, ensuring that pupils with higher levels of support needs are meaningfully included. Strong collaboration with the Speech and Language Therapist has enabled pupils to successfully use a range of communication devices within the Café setting. This has led to pupils being able to confidently take on all roles within the Café. An added bonus has been that members of the public have embraced the communication boards and are working in partnership with the young people, encouraging them to communicate. In addition, the learning from Roots Café has positively influenced other areas of school life, especially with the creation of a second café.



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



The school plans to continue to develop the Café provision by increasing opportunities for pupils to take active leadership roles, particularly in areas such as finance, organisation, and decision-making. There is also some scope to extend these enterprise skills into additional projects across the school. The Principal has been exploring an in-house accreditation system to replace external systems in use but not always entirely relevant. Furthermore, collaboration with Speech and Language Therapy is planned to continue in order to evaluate current practice and plan the next stage of development towards Roots Café becoming a fully established Communication Café.

Extending External Work Experience Opportunities

Through the “From Roots to Branching Out” initiative, the school has successfully expanded external work experience opportunities for pupils by developing strong links with local businesses and community organisations. Partnerships with Ark Community Gardens and Taste and See Café have proved particularly successful, with placements now embedded as long-term opportunities. Currently, five pupils attend these placements on a weekly basis, and three pupils have identified Ark Community Gardens as their preferred post-19 destination. Additional placements within the local library and shops further demonstrate the school’s commitment to providing meaningful and personalised pathways for learners.

Leaders are committed to working with external agencies to strengthen the options available to young people post-19. Having spoken to staff I understand that post-19 options are very limited for pupils with many being placed in unsuitable provisions where they do not have an appropriate peer group.

Sharing Effective Practice with Other Schools

The school has demonstrated a strong commitment to collaboration and the sharing of inclusive practice by presenting the Roots Café project at the IQM Cluster for Special Schools. This has provided an excellent opportunity to celebrate the school’s achievements while also supporting and inspiring other settings to develop enterprise and inclusive practice within their own contexts. The willingness of staff to share expertise reflects the school’s inclusive ethos and strong sense of community partnership.

Leaders will continue to share their expertise and support other schools in developing enterprise initiatives and inclusive approaches. Participation in wider projects, such as the ECO UNESCO Awards, will provide valuable opportunities to further showcase and celebrate this work, including the possibility of hosting a stand to promote the project more widely. Having previously won awards the school is keen to continue to develop this area.

Developing Preparation Programmes for Younger Pupils

Knockevin School has also successfully developed the “What a Hoot Café” at the Downpatrick site to prepare younger pupils for future work placements and enterprise opportunities. This initiative has provided younger pupils with valuable opportunities to develop work-related, communication, and life skills within a supportive and meaningful environment. Regular events involving staff and visitors have helped to create real experiences that build confidence, independence, and social interaction skills.



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



The school should continue to strengthen and further develop this work with the Downpatrick classes in order to enhance continuity, progression, and inclusive opportunities for pupils across the wider school community

Agreed Actions for the Next Steps in the Flagship Project

The current Flagship project is continuing into next academic year. What I found truly inspiring is that despite the success of the current Café set-up, staff know that there is more work to be done and are not sitting still. 'The school is learning all the time about how best to run Roots Café', the Principal told me. It is evident that Roots Café is evolving from its beginnings into a sophisticated vocational hub that successfully bridges the gap between the classroom and the community. Staff have created an environment where senior pupils can not only thrive but can also apply the 'Skillsbuilder' framework in real time, with all staff receiving appropriate training. This framework ensures that learning is broken into a series of sequential small steps, helping the pupils of Knockevin School to make tangible progress. A particularly impressive development is the collaboration between staff and the Speech and Language Team to trial communication devices, effectively transforming the space into a 'Communication Café' that ensures pupils with the most complex needs are fully included in customer facing roles.

While the school currently utilises external providers for accreditation, the long-term plan is to bring this process in house next year, combined with plans to add additional courses linked to life skills. Furthermore, the Café's commitment to ethical practices evidenced by their Fair Achiever Award and Green Flag status, ensures that pupils are learning about environmental responsibility alongside professional catering skills.

Overall, the Flagship project provides a vital pathway for post-19 transition, equipping pupils with the social and vocational skills necessary for life beyond school. There are quite limited options for pupils once they leave Knockevin School.

All pupils on the Castlewellan site now use Roots Café for a soft start each day as part of a nurturing approach following a long time on transport. This initiative also includes all pupils getting a free breakfast.

I was very fortunate to meet with the Speech and Language Therapist during my visit as she has been instrumental in exploring the growth of a range of communication options for pupils, ensuring that Roots Café is a fully inclusive environment. We talked at length about the planned developments which include expanding visual supports and communication resources that will enable a wider range of pupils to participate confidently in work experience opportunities within the Café. I was able to see some examples of the communication aids being used in the What a Hoot Café.



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



Overview

Knockevin School is an inclusive and nurturing school serving 136 pupils aged 3-19 across three rural sites in County Down. The school caters for children and young people with a wide range of complex learning needs, and it was immediately evident throughout the visit that inclusion is at the heart of the schools offer. The school motto, *'Together We Can Achieve More'*, is far more than just a statement; it is embedded in the culture, relationships, and practice across the entire school.

From the moment of arrival, the warmth of the welcome was striking. Communication aids are on display in reception ensuring that every child understands what is happening. Despite being heavily oversubscribed and responding to an increasingly changing and complex pupil profile, leaders and staff remain unwavering in their commitment to ensuring that every pupil is known, valued, and supported as an individual. There is a clear sense of purpose and compassion underpinning the work of the school. In a school with such individual learning needs it is essential that staff know and understand pupil's needs, and this was clearly evident throughout the day in all of the classrooms I visited and to all of the staff whom I spoke to. Pupils were engaged in a range of activities across the school during my visit. The site was very calm.

The school currently operates across three sites with the Early Years Centre, which caters for 24 pupils up to Year 7, the Knockevin site for 77 pupils aged 3-19 with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and the Castlewellan site for 35 post primary pupils. Leaders have given considerable thought to ensuring that the environments across all sites truly meet the needs of pupils. A carefully planned three-year development strategy is currently underway, with plans to further enhance outdoor areas, sensory facilities, and café provision, alongside the longer-term vision of developing a forest school. I was able to see the progress made so far and it is all coming together. I hope I will be able to see the finished project in use by pupils because the plans for the spaces are incredible. All planning has been undertaken with the pupils at the heart of it all, with leaders keen to ensure that pupils will be able to develop their social skills in a multitude of ways.

The impact of recent developments is already evident. Pupils are clearly benefitting from upgraded playgrounds and high-tech Sensory Rooms which now provide far more inclusive opportunities for play and interaction. Features such as the bike track and newly installed swings are not only popular with pupils but thoughtfully designed to promote social development, including turn taking and shared experiences. The school has eight wheelchair users and fully wheelchair accessible spaces ensure that all pupils can participate meaningfully in school life. Importantly, consideration has also been given to staff wellbeing, with social spaces created for staff to connect and recharge.

I felt privileged to start my day with a conversation with a parent who provided a particularly powerful insight into the impact of the school. He described how the school had *'changed my son'* following a very difficult period in his early life. He spoke emotionally about the commitment of staff and the progress his son had made, both in school and at home. He described the school as *'not just a school, it is a home, teachers know my son'*. I did see this young person in class later on in the day and spoke to his teacher and the progress was exceptional. This relational and nurturing culture exists across the school community. Parents are actively welcomed into school life and communication between home and school is a significant strength. The daily use of the



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



Seesaw app enables staff to share photographs, updates, and achievements with families, helping parents feel connected to their child's experiences and progress. I spoke to teachers about the use of the app, and they felt that it was an excellent tool for keeping families involved, especially as the majority of young people would struggle to share how their day was. There were numerous examples of the school going above and beyond to enrich pupils' experiences and improve wellbeing. The parent spoke warmly about his son being able to attend a Christmas concert and about the impact of sensory resources and therapeutic experiences, including horses being brought into school for pupils. Staff are clearly deeply invested in the children and young people they support.

Teaching and learning across the school are highly specialised, individualised and focuses on developing strong relationships. In the PMLD provision, there is a clear emphasis on intensive interaction, communication, and creating joyful shared experiences. I took part in a really lovely lesson for a PMLD class where we went to space. It was a visual and sensory delight with staff knowing what works to engage each and every child. Practice observed was highly responsive and meaningful, with learning carefully tailored to pupils' needs and interests. At the same time, expectations remain ambitious. The class teacher is very ambitious for her class, and she told me how her pupils had engaged with and performed Shakespeare.

There are so many examples of how leaders and staff work to ensure that Knockevin School is always fully inclusive. Staff work creatively to ensure that all pupils can participate in the wider life of the school community. Leaders acknowledged that many pupils find large assemblies overwhelming, so sensory assemblies have been carefully developed to ensure these young people can still come together with peers to celebrate achievements and shared experiences in a way that is accessible and meaningful to them.

The curriculum is enhanced further through a strong commitment to literacy, communication, and digital learning. Literacy is clearly valued throughout the school and there is a consistent drive to ensure all pupils can access stories, books, and language in ways appropriate to their needs. The environment is communication friendly, with visual supports and word mats used effectively throughout the school. Staff demonstrate creativity and enthusiasm, including writing bespoke stories for pupils and transforming the school annually for World Book Day celebrations.

ICT provision is a notable strength. The ICT Lead is always thinking of new initiatives and ways to engage all pupils and enhance learning. Staff utilise iPads effectively for whole class teaching while coding activities, Beebots, advanced robotics and virtual reality headsets help bring learning to life for pupils. Examples were shared of virtual reality technology being used to support Geography topics and immersive learning experiences, this equipment being essential as many young people are simply unable to attend out of school activities.

Governance is a significant strength of the school. Discussions with the Chair of Governors highlighted an informed and passionate commitment to the school community. It was a joy to speak with the Chair as her enthusiasm for the school shone through. Her longstanding connection with the school as both a parent and Governor provides the school with valuable perspective and insight. She explained that Governors are actively engaged in school life. Each Governor maintains links with specific departments and visits regularly to deepen their understanding of provision. There is a



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



clear commitment to ongoing training and development for Governors, ensuring they are well equipped to support and challenge leaders effectively. Governors are particularly ambitious regarding future opportunities and pathways for pupils, including employment and independence. The Chair is working with the Department for Education to drive through plans for a much needed new school building.

Whilst being very much spoilt in the *What a Hoot Café*, I had the opportunity to speak with both staff and pupils. The pupils I spoke to were very positive about their experiences in school and it was clear that they genuinely enjoy being part of the school community. In particular, they highlighted the school's reward system, which was motivating and meaningful for them. During my visit, I observed the class responsible for running the Café receiving their afternoon reward in recognition of exceptional work, and there was a palpable sense of pride and achievement among the pupils.

Pupil voice is clearly valued throughout the school. Staff are highly attuned to the different ways in which pupils communicate and consistently strive to ensure that every young person is given opportunities to express themselves in ways that are appropriate and accessible to them. The staff member overseeing the Café provision was exceptional. She demonstrated a deeply nurturing approach, balancing high expectations with warmth, encouragement, and genuine care for the pupils in her support.

There is a strong sense throughout the school that leaders, staff, Governors, and families are united in a shared vision for everyone. The school is, in many ways, 'dreaming big', particularly in relation to the planned new build and future café and this is one of the key things that sets this school apart. Importantly, staff also recognise that for some pupils with life limiting conditions, the focus must rightly be on quality of life, joy, relationships, and meaningful experiences and this was in abundance in the lessons. Overall, Knockevin Special School retains its status as an IQM Flagship school. The Principal and Vice Principal lead the school with vision and determination. I look forward to hearing about the progress made over the next year of their project.

The school continues to move from strength to strength in terms of its superb inclusive practice and I am firmly of the opinion that the school fully meets the standard required by the Inclusion Quality Mark to maintain its status as a Flagship School. I therefore recommend that the school retains its Flagship Status and is reviewed again in 12 months. The next review will look closely at how the school has interacted with its Inclusion Cluster and promoted continuing outreach. Evidence of cluster working will underpin the capacity for the school to maintain its Flagship Status.

Assessor: Ms Fiona Robinson

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:

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Joe McCann MBA NPQH

Chief Executive Officer of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd