



BUDDY BEAR TRUST
CONDUCTIVE EDUCATION SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL PALSY

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“a life time of difference”

Ms Caitriona Ruane
Minister of Education
Assembly for N.I.
2nd June 2009-05-07

REQUEST FOR URGENT MEETING

Dear Caitriona,

I wish to thank you for your letter dated 2 April 2009 in reply to my letter of 28 November 2008 regarding the education of children with cerebral palsy at the Buddy Bear School in light of the resolution of the Assembly 19 February 2008 *“That this Assembly supports conductive education and commends the Buddy Bear School, Dungannon, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education for financial support and assistance.”*

I appreciate your confirmation the funds will follow the child to an independent school should a Board place a child with a SEN statement in the school. You will be well aware from our correspondence that the problem has arisen because some Education Boards did not inform parents about the school because it is not grant aided. According to parents the same Boards make it difficult for them to have their child placed in the school.

Mrs Buchanan, a parent is on record over the difficulties she experienced in trying to have Zara placed in the Buddy Bear School and in trying to appeal the decision. The NEELB and the Chief Legal Adviser for the Boards challenged the extra time allocated by the independent President of the Appeal Tribunal. Mrs Buchanan had to secure the services of the well know Barrister Bob McCartney to represent her at the challenge to the time. Mrs Buchanan has been unable to find an Educational Psychologist in N.Ireland to assess Zara in support of her appeal. A psychologist has been found in England but the parents have to pay all costs.

I realise that this situation is not of your making but I am sure that both you and Mr McGimpsey are well aware of the terrible pressure parents have to try to cope with when they realise that their child is disabled. Many parents become disempowered and confused. Their lives change and they do not have the will or the energy to challenge the “system”.

I appreciate that you have a difficulty in core funding an independent school and it is for that reason I submitted a number of proposals in the hope that officials from your Department would have met with representatives of the Trust to explore options bearing in mind the decision of the UK Government in 1989 to help fund the introduction of Conductive Education to help children with cerebral palsy and the Feb 2008 resolution of our own Assembly to fund and support Conductive Education and the Buddy Bear School.

I am aware of the good will of all the MLAs and the leaders of the Political parties to our special children and the wishes of our parents to have Conductive Education. We need the cooperation of officials from Health and Education to try to overcome any points of conflict, principles or precedents. The total cost calculated at £220K which is not much for Government. The Trust and parents cannot continue to raise this amount of money while the publicity, debate and requests for meetings continue. I am concerned at the impact of all the pressure is having on parents who simply want to know that they are doing the best for their child. The Assembly must find a way of funding the work of the School on an interim / pilot basis.

The Trust has endeavoured to protect the children and parents from the glare of the media. While publicity helps to raise fund it is also an invasion into private and sensitive areas for the child and the family.

The Trust has followed up on the proposals of 28 November 2008:

- *A Conductive Education Unit with Out Reach facilities attached to a Controlled or Maintained School;*
- *A Conductive Education Unit/Outreach attached to a Special School;*
- *A pilot project linked to a Teacher Training College/University or Wolverhampton University; and*
- *A pilot involving Education and Health and Conductive Education under a Management of (my) choice.*

Given that the will of the Assembly is that the Buddy Bear School should be funded the response “*DE has no funding available to support any projects along the lines suggested*” was not the reply hoped for after such a waiting period.

The Trust has met with CCMS and has submitted an outline Development Proposal for consideration, copy attached. I would have a concern that the closure of the Boards and establishment of ESA might impact on the process. I should add that had we known that it would have taken so long to receive your reply we could have begun the process earlier when we had time and funds. It may be that there is scope from your Department to help the Buddy Bear School in the interim.

While we have suggested an attachment with a special school it is unlikely that the Boards will seek to move on it given record and their inertia because of their closure in December. Once again if the Buddy Bear School can be funded it could become a valuable resource for ESA

A link with Teacher Training College/ Queen’s offers a variety of opportunities for research, capacity development of teachers of children with special needs and training of classroom/ school assistants. DE and or Health Funds could be channeled via the College / University on a temporary basis until the arrangements including evaluation and success criteria were discussed and agreed. It is appreciated that Sir Reg Empey will have to have an input should training packages/ modules be designed and delivered on Conductive Education. The partnership with the College/University could be expanded to include a cross border element as some parents in the South would like Conductive Education for their children. (See correspondence from Professor Tony Gallagher)

A Cross Boarder Project is a real possibility. A number of parents from the Dundalk and Drogheda have made positive representation to their politicians who have indicated to the Trust that as the funds are very small they would approach the Education Minister for financial support. A local special school in Dunleer has provisionally offered a classroom and equipment to help the parents establish an Outreach Facility with the Buddy Bear School. The Trust hopes to address the local Councils and the Education Committee before meeting the Education Minister. The Trust hopes that your Officials will meet with us to try to progress this matter and to secure funds. We have made contact with MEPs and TD who are making arrangements for us to meet the Education Minister and we have also made contact with various officials in Athlone who work on cross border issues.

The Trust is aware of the Middletown Autism Centre and the decision of the Southern Government to withdraw some financial support. It is sad for the children and parents particularly as the accommodation and services have been provided. The Trust intends to write to the Chairman to explore the possibility of it being able to assist the children with cerebral palsy bearing in mind that there is surplus capacity and the Centre is dedicated to helping children with special needs and the possibility of a cross border arrangement at a much lower expense level to the public purse. Once again the Assembly (DE & Health) could fund the Buddy Bear and Outreach via the Centre.

I note in your letter that the First Minister appears not to have advised you of the existence of any proposal for a cross border project. I can only assume that you have been inadvertently misinformed. Given the stresses and strains of Ministerial life it is perhaps understandable not all specific events are not readily recalled. However, I was present with others including a reporter with the Belfast Telegraph when reference was made to a cross border project and a previously planned meeting with Foreign Minister, Mr. D Ahern TD when the matter would be raised. I have enclosed for your attention a copy of the Belfast Telegraph and the comments attributed to Mr. McGuinness. You will appreciate that the Trust would not wish to be accused of making unfounded statements. It is unfortunate that a doubt may have been inadvertently cast on the integrity of the Trust.

We have been advised by Dungannon Council that OFMDFM has decided not to meet a delegation of Councils that support Conductive Education. The correspondence from you and Mr. McGimpsey was attached to the letter from the Council. While everyone is aware of the time pressures on both of you

and your efforts to improve the lives of children particularly children with special needs by introducing the SEN and Inclusion Review and the new Commissioning Arrangements to access help via Health the parents are distressed that it has taken from January to June to be refused a meeting with OFMDFM.

The parents and no doubt many of the Councils cannot understand why a meeting is not possible bearing in mind that the Buddy Bear School is in danger of closing because of the actions of some Boards and the failure to date to receive funds by one means or another albeit that support schemes and SEN Reviews may be introduced which may help in the future.

The parents who are now lobbying their respective Councils have asked the Trust to request you and Mr. McGimpsey to reconsider your decisions and to meet with the deputation from the Councils in the hope of finding a real solution given all the good will and cross political support including the support of the Church leaders.

The parents remain confident that OFMDFM will respect their wish to have a meeting with them regarding the future of their children.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you or any of your Officials require any additional information as it essential that this matter is resolved without delay.

While the Trust and the volunteers maybe worn down by the bureaucracy of the Assembly the parents wish our elected politicians to know and appreciate that both they and their children with cerebral palsy will still be here wondering why their children could not be helped to have more independence by Conductive Education in view of all the promises and pledges of support.

Yours sincerely

Brendan McConville

Chairman
07867786804

Copied to OFMDFM and Mr McGimpsey

Copy of correspondence from Professor Tony Gallagher

Dear Brendan,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss issues related to conductive education. I note that the Assembly has agreed a motion supporting conductive education and commending OFMDFM and the Minister of Education for providing financial support and assistance. In the light of this I am happy to confirm that we are very interested in continuing our conversations and exploring opportunities on how we might take this forward. Everyone is interested in maintaining the highest possible level of service for all our young people, including those with special education needs. It is important also that initiatives in this area are informed by the best quality research and evidence. I would be very happy to explore possible avenues for collaboration in future.

Tony

**Professor Tony Gallagher
Head, School of Education
Queen's University Belfast**

McGuinness and Paisley in rare show of unity for special needs school



The Belfast Telegraph

They're the unlikeliest of bedfellows, but Sinn Fein's chief negotiator Martin McGuinness and DUP leader Ian Paisley are united in their support for the Buddy Bear Trust.

Mr McGuinness, the former education minister, said he valued the work carried out at the threatened Dungannon school and was more than happy to work with the DUP to ensure it did not close.

Last week, Mr Paisley pledged his support for the independent needs facility, saying he would do everything he could to keep it open.

Yesterday at Stormont, Mr McGuinness met 19-year-old Daniel Murphy, a cerebral palsy sufferer who attended the school for 12 years.

Mr Paisley spent time with Daniel - and his Buddy Bear friend - last week.

Like the DUP leader, Mr McGuinness said Sinn Fein was "very supportive" of the school.

He said: "The trust has some very powerful allies here and we need to ensure that every child has the opportunity to benefit from this school."

Mr McGuinness also said he would be seeking support from the Irish government to help save an independent special needs school in Dungannon from closure.

Speaking ahead of a meeting with Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Dermot Ahern in Dundalk yesterday, Mr McGuinness said he would be highlighting the plight of the Buddy Bear Trust.

He said he hoped to investigate the possibility of getting wide ranging support for the Buddy Bear, similar to what has been put in place for the new Centre of Excellence for Autism which finally opened up in Middletown this year.

"This is something that could benefit the whole island of Ireland," he said. "Daniel is the evidence that great work has been achieved at the school and we need to ensure that every other child has the opportunity to benefit from this."

Mr McGuinness said he would raise the issue with Bertie Ahern and Dermot Ahern, who he was due to meet yesterday.

Currently, Buddy Bear is the only school outside of Hungary in Europe which offers Conductive Education.

Since it began in 1989, it has helped more than 200 children and there are now fears because it only has two current students it will not survive past the end of this year.

To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about United Kingdom support for the international Peto institute.

§ [Mr. Scott](#)

I have been asked to reply.

We continue to value conductive education as practised at the Peto institute in Budapest and welcome the Hungarian Government's plans to build a new international institute in response to increasing demand from a number of countries as well as the United Kingdom.

We recognise that there is a wide and effective range of services for disabled children in this country and we believe that increased availability of conductive education would be a valuable addition to those services.

Conductive education is an educational system based on a whole person approach, which aims to develop children with a motor disability to enable them to participate fully in mainstream education. The professional input comes from one individual, the conductor, who takes the child through the whole range of processes connected with development. The conductor's role integrates some of the knowledge and skills of a number of separate professional groups, for example, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, teachers and nurses. Close and active parental involvement is an important feature of the system.

We have concluded that the best way forward is to enter into an agreement with the Hungarian Government that in return for a financial contribution towards the capital costs of the new institute the United Kingdom would have guaranteed access to a proportion commensurate with our contribution of the available places both for children to receive conductive education and for trainees to be trained as conductors. In this way we would secure the continuing availability of conductive education for United Kingdom children in Budapest while building up a nucleus of trained conductors to provide this service in the United Kingdom.

We have therefore agreed to provide a total of £5 million from Government funds over the next four financial years towards the capital costs of the new institute subject to conclusion of a satisfactory agreement covering access for the children and trainee conductors, and to satisfactory progress with construction. In addition, we will be seeking to stimulate interest in the private and voluntary sectors with a view to supplementing the Government contribution by a similar amount raised [849W](#) from these sources. Officials will be taking forward the detailed negotiations with the Hungarian authorities early in the new year

Northern Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY Tuesday 19 February 2008

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports conductive education and commends the Buddy Bear School, Dungannon, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education for financial support and assistance