

**ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT &
REGISTRATION**

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

**Assessment of Education
in places other than Recognised Schools**

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

Alfa Steiner Secondary School

Address

Raheen Road,
Tuamgraney,
Co Clare.

Telephone

061 640798

Name of Principal/Director

Angela Welbourne

Name of Assessor/s

Paul Sloan
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

20th November 2025
and
16th February 2026

Date of Final Report

28th April 2026

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	09:20		
Closing time:	15:30		
Main breaks during the day:	11:15	to	11:45
	13:15	to	13:45

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

N/A

1.2. Name(s) of principal and/or other teacher(s) interviewed

Angela Welbourne - Principal

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

This assessment report is based on the following sources of evidence:

- Information furnished by the school during the visit, including Strategic Plan updates, staff lists, timetables, and sample student reports.
- Comprehensive information provided prior to the onsite visit, outlining governance, curriculum, and development plans.
- Information available on the school website.
- An interview with the principal and key staff members during the onsite visit on 22nd November 2025 and the 16th of February 2026.
- Discussion with staff during classroom visits.
- Classroom visits and observations, interactions with students.
- Observation of educational materials, student work, and the learning environment.
- Review of policies, including the updated Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment and Code of Conduct.
- Following the initial assessment visit on 22nd November, the school provided additional documentation on 16 February 2026, including newly drafted or updated policies dated January 2026 (Code of Conduct, Positive Conduct Policy, Learning Protocols, Complaints and

Concerns Procedures, Parent Escalation Policy). These documents were reviewed as part of the overall assessment.

Section 2 General Information And School Context

ALFA (Active Learning For Adolescents) Steiner Secondary School in East Clare provides a full-time, co-educational, progressive education programme for students aged 12-17 who, with their families, are seeking an alternative to mainstream education. The school's programme is grounded in the principles of Steiner Waldorf education and is accredited through the Crossfield's Diploma & Certificate in Integrated Education, a qualification developed by a consortium of Steiner schools and regulated by Ofqual (UK).

Founded in 2001 by parents, the school shares its site with Raheen Wood Steiner National School. Governance is provided by Ard Aoibhinn Community Initiatives, with operational oversight from a School Management Group (parents and staff) and educational leadership from core group of teachers.

The school is currently implementing its 'Strategic Plan 2022-2025'. The school notes its recent key achievements include increasing student capacity through the construction of two new classrooms, strengthening staff training in Steiner pedagogy and multisensory approaches, and consolidating its professional partnerships, including through membership of the Irish Waldorf Education Association. The school community recently engaged with an international consultant in a workshop on "Community and Leadership in a Thriving Waldorf School," which will inform the next strategic cycle (2026-2029).

There are currently 58 students enrolled, a significant increase from 41 at the time of the previous review assessment. The student body is diverse, including students from various backgrounds, those with special educational needs, and a notable number who were previously homeschooled. The school serves a wide range of learners, including those who have struggled in mainstream settings.

The educational provision is structured into a Junior Programme (Class 7/8, equivalent to 1st/2nd year, 23 students) and a Senior Programme (Class 9, 17 students, and Class 10, 12 students, with 3 more overseas students joining in January 2026). The Senior Programme leads to the Crossfield's Diploma (NFQ Level 4).

Prospective students attend an Open Day in September and an educational interview. Trial days are offered for mid-year enquiries.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

Leadership at ALFA follows the Steiner model. The teaching staff is comprised of five core teachers who form the College of Teachers. The College of Teachers take responsibility for teaching and learning and has a role in managing and developing the school's programmes. Angela Welbourne,

who is member of the college of teachers and the management group, currently fulfils the identified role of the principal, and holds responsibility for oversight of teaching, learning, and programme development. The staff meet weekly.

The wider subject teachers include eleven sessional teachers delivering subject lessons, three guest teachers for specialist Main Lessons, an administration team, and auxiliary staff. As reported by the school all staff are Garda vetted and trained in child safeguarding.

A designated Learning Support Coordinator works with students, focusing on social integration, confidence, and academic needs. Staff receive guidelines and training in multisensory and neuro-inclusive approaches.

Subsequent documentation requested and submitted in February 2026 indicated that a number of procedures outlined in the newly drafted and revised versions of the school's policies had not yet been fully embedded in staff practice. This included the Code of Conduct for Students, the Positive Conduct Policy, the Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment, the Requests and Complaints Policy, and a Parent Escalation to Authorities Policy.

Section 4 Time Devoted To Education

The school calendar for 2025/26 provides for 163 school days over 34 weeks, from 28th August 2025 to 5th June 2026. Term dates align with mainstream secondary schools. The school day runs from 09:20 to 15:30, with a 30-minute morning break and a 30-minute lunch break.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The ALFA Secondary School is located in a tranquil woodland setting in East Clare, near the villages of Tuamgraney and Scariff, adjacent to the Raheen Wood Community National School. Significant and purposeful development of the physical infrastructure has occurred since the last assessment, directly addressing previous accommodation limitations. The school now operates from three main buildings. Two of these are dedicated, multipurpose classrooms: one for the Junior group, one for Class 9, and one for Class 10. This expansion has allowed the senior cohort to be split into distinct year groups. The third building accommodates the office/administration space and, notably, a new dedicated staff room, created from a previous classroom area. This provides valuable professional and planning space for the teaching team.

The original Geodesic Dome continues to serve as a vital specialist space for woodwork and woodcraft lessons, and as a flexible area for break-time activities such as table tennis and table football. Outdoor facilities remain a considerable asset, with students having direct access to surrounding woodland, a playing field, a basketball court, a football area, and outdoor gym equipment. The school maximises its use of space through careful timetabling; for example, the junior classroom

also functions as the music room for sessional lessons. The overall learning environment is noticeably flexible, resourceful with student artwork and projects.

Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment' are identified and included on posters displayed within the physical space. It was evident at the time of the assessment that the physical learning environment and atmosphere is positive. It was also evident that some of the behavioural and relational guidelines outlined in the 'Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment' were not consistently implemented within classroom practice.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

The curriculum remains based on Steiner Waldorf principles, structured around immersive Main Lessons (2-hour morning blocks for 3-4 weeks) and weekly Subject Lessons. This approach as described by the school is to nurture the 'hand, head, and heart'.

A significant development is the formalisation and success of the Crossfield's Diploma. Of the 2023-2025 cohort, 3 students achieved Distinction and 4 achieved Merit. The diploma comprises 10 modules (e.g., Independent Project, Natural Sciences, Global Awareness) and is a recognised Level 4 qualification on the NFQ, providing a direct pathway to Further Education and apprenticeships.

The curriculum now includes a mandatory rotation for all students in Gardening, Currach Rowing, and Equine Studies, each for a 5-week block. The Equine programme, 'HorsePlay', developed by a specialist, focuses on emotional intelligence, empathy, and connection through non-verbal companionship. An annual Activity Week before October half-term offers intensive practical workshops in areas like blacksmithing, ceramics, and filmmaking

6.2. Language and literacy skills

English lessons are timetabled for three 45-minute periods per week for Juniors and Seniors, taught by dedicated teachers. Oral skills are developed through the annual drama production (Class 7/8 & 10) and a new film-making Main Lesson (Class 9). The Crossfield's Language & Literature module develops critical analysis and creative writing. Senior students are currently engaged in a "History of Drama" Main Lesson

The development of language and literacy skills are integrated across the ALFA curriculum in dedicated subject lessons, immersive main lessons, and through the expressive arts. As mentioned, English is timetabled for three 45-minute classes per week for both Junior and Senior groups. The Senior English curriculum, as evidenced in student portfolios, is both rigorous and creative. This year, students engaged in a detailed study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, analysing colour

symbolism and narrative layers, and produced formal book reports. This was complemented by a Main Lesson, 'Short Stories and the Art of the Glimpse', where students deconstructed works from Margaret Atwood, Edgar Allan Poe, and Virginia Woolf, exploring plot, narrative voice, and characterisation, before planning and writing their own original short stories. Teacher feedback notes students' ability to "synthesise multiple different elements into a coherent, unified whole" and develop a writing voice with "more confidence and depth."

Oral language, rhetorical skill, and empathetic communication are developed through the central role of drama and performance. This is a core pedagogical element. All students participate in major annual productions; this year, the Senior group staged Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. The process involved deep character analysis, vocal and physical work, and an understanding of the play's historical and moral context. For Class 9, a new Film Making Main Lesson provides a modern platform for visual storytelling, screenwriting, and technical collaboration. The Junior group's drama work is currently fostering confidence and group work skills.

Literacy is further reinforced through the Crossfield's 'Language & Literature' module, which structures the development of independent language use for critical thinking, analysis, and social interaction. Student work samples provide clear evidence of outcomes: in a 'Revolutions' Main Lesson, students craft diary entries from the perspective of citizens during the Irish War of Independence and wrote news articles on the Easter Rising from global perspectives. The student examples demonstrated skills in research, production, and adapting writing for different genres and audiences. The school states the aim of this is to develop "lifelong interest and engagement in language and literature."

During the observation of an English lesson, students were engaged in individual reading, each selecting a book of their own choosing. An accompanying worksheet was used, as this assignment included preparation of a presentation to be delivered by each student to the peer group. While the approach of self-selection can encourage enjoyment, autonomy, and positive engagement with reading, the absence of a shared or prescribed class text meant that opportunities for whole-class discussion, collective analysis, and structured skill development were limited. A more balanced approach that incorporates both independent choice and common texts may better support consistent progression in key literacy skills.

6.3. Numeracy

Maths is timetabled for three 45-minute periods weekly, supported by dedicated Main Lessons. The Junior Main Lesson "Maths: The Language of the Universe" explores the history of numbers, Fibonacci, and the golden ratio. Senior Main Lessons cover Algebra, Statistics, and Geometry. The approach emphasises problem-solving, pattern recognition, and the practical application of mathematics.

Numeracy at ALFA is developed through a dual approach of consistent skills practice in weekly subject lessons and profound conceptual exploration in dedicated Main Lessons, firmly aligning with the Steiner ethos of discovering the meaningful application of mathematics in the world. The curriculum moves systematically through core topics: number sense, indices, algebra, coordinate geometry, and trigonometry. One assignment required seniors to produce a comprehensive overview

of the entire number system, from Hindu-Arabic origins to imaginary numbers, demonstrating both historical understanding and technical grasp.

The Mathematics Main Lessons, which allow for a deeper thematic immersion. The Junior Main Lesson covers, 'Maths: The Language of the Universe', and Roman numerals. It then investigates the Fibonacci sequence and the golden ratio, actively searching for these mathematical patterns in pinecones, sunflowers, and human body proportions, before translating them into geometric forms like the golden spiral and pentagon. This links with the Steiner model of education.

At Senior level, complexity increases with blocks such as 'Platonic Solids'. Here, students engage in advanced compass and ruler construction of the five solids, derived formulae relating faces, edges, and vertices, and proof. The students have built physical models and completed projects on related mathematicians like Euler. Other blocks covered 'Algebra & Statistics', where students collected and analysed class height data, learned to identify statistical misuse, and completed projects (e.g., analysing winning motorbike racers). The school provided examples of teacher feedback that commends students for "strong motivation to deepen understanding" and the ability to tackle problems "both creatively and logically."

The Crossfield's 'Mathematics' module aims to "train students to recognise relationships and patterns," requiring "mobility in thinking" alongside "rigour and attention to process." Observations of student work from geometric drawings and elegant algebraic solutions to a student-devised rhyme summarising statistical terms show learners calculating. This approach as reported by the school is designed to equip them with the robust, transferable numeracy skills necessary for future academic or vocational pathways.

6.4. Irish

The school is now offering Irish as a subject to its students. A concerted effort has been made to enhance the status and methodology of Irish teaching. The weekly schedule now Irish class. The school also have a cultural immersion morning per half-term featuring activities like set dancing, storytelling, and a *café as Gaeilge*. This dual approach aims to build communicative confidence and cultural engagement.

Children attending an Independent School should be afforded opportunity for the study of Irish, however the study of Irish is not a requirement for registration under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Where Irish is included in the provision, an Independent School may identify students attending that they consider would qualify for an exemption from the study of Irish. Independent Schools can make decisions in consultation with parents regarding arrangements for these children. Any arrangements made in relation to the study of Irish does not entitle students to an exemption from the study of Irish in the event of a subsequent enrolment at a Department of Education recognised school.

Parents of children attending an Independent School should be informed of and acquaint themselves with implications of not taking Irish and/or having a second language. Parents seeking information should consult with the Department of Education www.education.ie and/or the State Examinations Commission www.examinations.ie with regard to the requirement for Irish and/or an additional language..

6.5. Other areas of learning

The curriculum is delivered through subject lessons and main lessons, ensuring a holistic education that develops practical, artistic, social, and academic capacities.

- **Wellbeing:** A structured, age-appropriate SPHE/RSE programme is delivered weekly. For Juniors, the focus is on identity, safe online communication, managing anxiety, and understanding puberty. The Senior programme deepens this exploration to include drug awareness (e.g., a dedicated project on the rise of vaping), critical media literacy, healthy relationships. A notable initiative is a Class 10 intergenerational project with the local Raheen Day Centre, fostering compassion and community connection through shared stories and music.
- **Arts & Practical Skills:** A specialist-led programme delivers high-quality instruction in Art, Textiles, Woodwork, and Music. The art curriculum moves from foundational drawing to colour theory and linear perspective, culminating in projects inspired by poetry and artist research. In practical crafts, students' progress from designing and sewing garments from recycled materials in Textiles to mastering fine joinery in woodwork, ultimately designing and building their own furniture. Student artwork, crafted projects, and theatre sets are prominently displayed.
- **French:** The teaching methodology mirrors the enhanced approach to Irish, focusing on building conversational confidence and cultural knowledge. Alongside grammar and written skills, weekly conversation classes are facilitated in small, ability-grouped sessions. Termly 'French cultural mornings' immerse students in activities conducted entirely in the target language, such as singing, and cultural cafés.
- **Physical Education:** Despite space limitations, the PE programme is dynamic and inclusive. Under the guidance of a dedicated specialist teacher, the focus is on cardio fitness, strength, teamwork, and participation. A significant achievement has been the establishment of a competitive volleyball programme; both senior boys' and girls' teams reached the quarterfinals of the Volleyball Ireland schools' league. The programme also includes athletics, soccer, and a variety of team games.
- **Sciences, History & Geography:** These core academic disciplines are delivered not as isolated subjects but as immersive, thematic explorations within Main Lessons. For example, senior studies have included Main Lessons in 'Chemistry of Metals', 'Geology and Plate Tectonics', and 'The History of Revolutions', the latter involving detailed local historical research and a trip to Belfast. The comprehensive 2025/26 Main Lesson schedule provided by the school outlines the progression of themes across all year groups.
- **Unique Programmes:** The curriculum involves rotating programmes. All students participate in 5-week blocks of Gardening (learning organic cultivation and food preservation), Currach Rowing on Lough Derg (in self-built boats where possible), and Equine Studies ("HorsePlay"). The equine programme, designed and delivered by a specialist, is a structured therapeutic and developmental experience focused on non-verbal communication, empathy, emotional regulation, and building a "relaxed" nervous system through connection with horses.

6.6. Special Educational Needs

The provision for special educational needs (SEN) is a significant and well-integrated strength of the school. The Learning Support Coordinator adopts a proactive, holistic, and strength-based approach, working in close conjunction with all teaching staff. The philosophy is to support the "whole child," prioritising social integration, confidence, and self-esteem alongside academic progress. This is operated through a combination of targeted intervention and whole-staff capacity building.

The coordinator's approach is both diagnostic and facilitative. For students arriving with, or suspected of having, a diagnosis (such as Autism, Dyslexia, or ADHD), an initial period of observation is followed by an individual assessment to develop a tailored support plan. Interventions often employ a neuro-physical approach, using targeted movement and sensory exercises informed by Steiner and neuro-developmental principles to address regulation and classroom engagement. Support is delivered flexibly; some students receive regular weekly 1:1 sessions, while others are supported in small groups or through in-class strategies. The coordinator also acts as a dedicated mentor for her SEN students, ensuring strong communication links between staff, the student, and parents.

The school's effectiveness is notably demonstrated in its work with students who have a history of school refusal, where it collaborates closely with families and external agencies like CAMHS. To create a consistently inclusive environment, the coordinator has developed and disseminated practical, neuro-inclusive "Tips for Teachers" to the staff. These guidelines offer concrete strategies, clarity and providing notes in advance, and utilising multi-sensory teaching to reduce barriers to learning for all students, particularly those with dyslexia or organisational difficulties. This approach ensures that SEN support is also shared responsibility, embedded within the classroom practice of all teaching staff.

Despite the generally strong SEN ethos and holistic wellbeing approach observed, the February 2026 follow-up review identified inconsistencies in the implementation of expected practices, particularly in relation to follow-through on agreed regulation strategies and the systematic documentation of interventions, as required by the school's policies.

Section 7 The Voice Of The Child

The voice of the student is actively valued and structured within daily school life. The assessors held a focus group with a cohort of students, who spoke very positively about their experiences at the school. Students clearly felt heard by staff and expressed a strong sense of enjoyment and belonging. They were clear about expectations for learning and behaviour within the school community. Peer to peer relationships were demonstrated as meaningful and caring and inclusion and support of fellow students was an important element within the classroom and the school community.

Formal channels for student expression include a weekly check-in within Wellbeing classes and a dedicated mentor programme for every student. Pedagogically, students are routinely encouraged to provide feedback on lessons and to engage in self-assessment, while collaborative learning environments validate daily contributions. The requirement for a student-led Independent Project within

the Crossfield's Diploma further empowers substantive choice and ownership. Student perspective is an integral part of the school's learning culture and community development.

Section 8 Assessment And Record Keeping

- Formative: Teachers provide ongoing verbal and written feedback. Main Lesson teachers give detailed end-of-block feedback, samples of which were reviewed and found to be supportive and constructive.
- Summative: Mid-year and end-of-year written reports are compiled for all students, gathering input from every teacher. The 2025 Crossfield's internal and external quality assurance reports confirmed the high standard of student work and teacher assessments, while recommending even more timely feedback to students.
- Diploma Assessment: Work for the Crossfield's Diploma is rigorously assessed against module criteria and moderated externally.
- Student Voice: Students are encouraged to self-assess and give feedback on their lessons. Wellbeing classes include regular check-ins.
- Parent Communication: Formal parent-teacher meetings are held in Spring, with reports shared in January and at year-end.
- The documentation submitted in February 2026 included several newly drafted or revised policies—namely the Code of Conduct for Students, the Positive Conduct Policy, the Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment, the Concerns and Complaints Policy, and the Parent Escalation to External Authorities Policy. A review of these materials highlighted that certain procedures requiring record-keeping were not yet fully aligned with the expectations outlined in these updated policies.

Section 9 Other Relevant Information

The school has provided updated policies, including its Child Safeguarding Statement, Mobile Phone Policy, and a detailed Code of Conduct with clear graduated responses to misbehaviour. The "Protocols for Creating the Best Learning Environment" document clearly outlines expectations for students, staff, and parents, promoting a respectful and purposeful community. It is noted, however, that many of these policies were newly developed or revised in January 2026, and evidence from the follow-up review indicated that the implementation stage was at an early point, with several procedures not yet embedded in practice.

Section 10 Evaluation Of The Education Provision And Recommendations

Based on the assessment visit of 20 November 2025 and follow-up visit on 16 February 2026, along with a review of the additional documentation supplied, the assessors are of the opinion that the education provided at ALFA Steiner Secondary School continues to constitute “*a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social*” as required under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. This is supported by evidence of a committed teaching staff, a holistic and well-structured curriculum, strong SEN ethos, and an inclusive learning environment that supports a diverse range of learners.

The school continues to make progress in its strategic development, including classroom expansion, strengthened staff training, and curricular enhancement. Engagement with external accreditation processes, such as the Crossfields Diploma, and the implementation of internal and external quality assurance recommendations further demonstrate a commitment to improvement and reflective practice.

Documentation updating policies, as requested and submitted by the school in January 2026, including the code of behaviour, complaints, communication, and learning environment expectations, indicated that the school was engaged at an early stage in formalising and embedding a consistent whole-school procedural framework. Policies and procedures provided were newly drafted or recently revised. Documentation provided was further reviewed and discussed at the second part of the assessment in February 2026. The school had not yet fully integrated updated and new policies into daily practice. The school identified their intention to continue to review and implement policy and procedure.

Assessors Recommendations

Evidence gathered during the follow-up visit identified some inconsistencies between the school's stated procedures and the practical implementation of behaviour management, communication protocols, record-keeping, and aspects of support. The school demonstrates strong relational ethos and intentions and are actively engaged in and committed to continuous improvement. The school should be commended for their ongoing engagement to evaluate and review the provision. To support this, it is recommended that all identified gaps between policy and practice is given attention. This will ensure clarity and consistency across all areas of the provision.

The following recommendations are made to support this action

- It is recommended that the school adopt a more structured literacy programme using prescribed and curriculum-aligned reading material. While independent choice has benefits, the absence of common texts may limit the opportunities for literacy development. Shared reading materials and clearly defined learning objectives would enable a coherent whole-class approach and ensure consistent progression in comprehension, writing, and oral communication for all students.
- Immediate Policy Implementation and Embedding - The school should establish a structured plan for implementing the newly drafted and updated policies, including timelines, staff training, communication with parents and students, and ongoing monitoring to ensure policies progress from draft stage to consistent practice.

- **Alignment Between Policy and Practice** - A comprehensive policy-to-practice audit should be undertaken to identify gaps between written procedures and actual implementation to ensure consistent follow-through on regulation strategies, clear documentation of interventions, and reliable support structures in line with updated policies.
- Communication structures should be strengthened to ensure internal procedures including behaviour responses, communication, documentation, and parent engagement are applied consistently.
- Procedures should establish clear expectations for behaviour follow-ups, communication logs, and documentation of interventions. The school should monitor compliance regularly to ensure consistent adherence and implementation.
- **Staff Training on Updated Policies** - A structured whole-staff training programme should be introduced to ensure full understanding and consistent application of the newly updated policies to main clarity, including behaviour management, communication procedures, SEN support approaches, and parental engagement.
- **Consistency of Behavioural Expectations and Routines** - A whole-school approach to routines, behavioural expectations, consequences, and positive supports should be strengthened. Staff should receive clear guidance to ensure consistent and transparent application across all classes and learning environments

With reference to the development of policies and their implementation and the recommendations above, it is recommended that a review of the provision takes place at the beginning of the 2026/2027 academic year and no later than 6 months from the date of the final report.

The findings of the assessment were discussed with the participants on the date of the assessment. The participants were advised that the decision regarding registration would be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).

Following the assessment, a draft report is provided to the principal, along with a Factual Accuracy and Feedback Form, which may be submitted within a specified timeframe, in response to the content of the draft report. The report, along with any information provided on the feedback form for consideration, is brought to the AEARS Registration Panel. The Registration Panel make decisions regarding registration of children in receipt of the education at the Independent School.

Section 11 Discussion Of Finding Of Report With Principal

The findings of this assessment, including the evaluation of the education provision and the recommendations outlined in Section 10 were discussed in detail with the Principal, Angela Welbourne, at the conclusion of the onsite visit on 22nd November 2025.

The additional findings arising from the February 2026 review of newly submitted policies were discussed with the leadership team, including the need for immediate alignment between policy development and day-to-day practice.

The positive outcomes of the assessment were acknowledged, and the recommendations for ongoing development were presented as constructive steps to support the school's continued growth and enhancement of its provision.

Section 12 Outcome

Outcome Of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment And Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements For Section 14 Registration Of Children Attending The School

The assessment report was brought to Tusla Registration Panel for a decision regarding registration. The Registration Panel decided that children attending Alfa Steiner Secondary School will be registered and retained on the register of children receiving an education in a place other than a recognised school as required by Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

Registration is subject to a periodic review by the Child and Family Agency