

**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

Headfort School

Address

Kells,
Co. Meath,
A82H7P2.

Telephone

046 9271116

Name of Principal/Director

Mr Philip McCormick

Name of Assessor/s

Lisa Duffy
Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

19th November 2024

Date of Final Report

28th February 2025

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	08:20		
Closing time:	15:00 (Junior Infants-2 nd Form) 17:30 (3 rd /4 th Form) 18:00 (5 th /6 th Form)		
Main breaks during the day:	11:00 12:15 (Infants)	to	11:30 13:30
	13:00	to	13:30 (3 rd to 6 th Form)
	15:30	to	15:45 (3 rd to 6 th Form)

Is school in operation for more than five years?

Yes

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

00/00/0000

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

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Mr. Philip Mc Cormick (principal) and the head of teaching and learning

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

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

- Information furnished in form R2 completed by the principal
- An interview with the principal and the head of teaching and learning
- Classroom visits
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the pupils
- Observation of the educational materials in use
- Review of the school's website www.headfortschool.com
- Review of the school's newsletter
- Review of school policies viewed during the assessment
- Relevant School documentation as referenced in the report and including:
 - Child Safeguarding Statement and Risk Assessment
 - Health and Safety Statement

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Headfort School is an independent, fee-paying, non- denominational, co-educational day and boarding primary school situated on a historic campus just outside Kells in Co Meath. The school was established in 1949 and the 75th anniversary of education at Headfort was celebrated during 2024. The school closed briefly in March 2020, but re-opened its doors again to pupils in September 2020. Headfort Trust own and manage the school. The trust holds approximately two formal meetings per quarter and all meetings are attended by the principal. New members are invited to join the board when a vacancy arises.

The school welcomes both Irish and international students, offering them the option of boarding on a full or part time basis from ten years of age. The school is non-denominational, welcoming children of all faiths and none. Enrolment levels have steadily increased over the last three years and there are currently 121 pupils enrolled in the school. For the purposes of registration, 109 pupils, aged 6 and over are enrolled in the school. The capacity of the school is capped at 140 pupils. Pupils are provided with a cooked meal and snacks each day, and after school supports and activities are offered to all who wish to avail of them.

A new English as an Additional Language (EAL) course is currently being piloted in the school. This course is aimed at international students aged approximately 13 to 15 years old, who wish to reach the required International English Language Testing System (IELTS). IELTS scores are typically needed to enter secondary schools in Ireland.

Upon completion of this course, the staff at Headfort School assist the pupils in finding a suitable secondary school placement. There is capacity to increase the number of places available on this course, should the need arise. The school also offers a Senior 1 class for pupils who have completed sixth class, which acts as a bridge between primary and secondary school. This programme is designed to help pupils develop personally, gain leadership skills and mature prior to entering secondary school.

The principal is available to meet with the parents of prospective pupils in advance of enrolment and prospective pupils are welcome to avail of a trial day in the school. All prospective students are interviewed by the principal.

The school is in the process of re-forming a Parents' Association, who will play a valuable role in supporting the school. Parents' nominees will be democratically elected in the near future. Open communication is valued in the school. Each class teacher has a back-to-school meeting with parents, in which they share targets, discuss their plans for the year ahead and highlight any changes which parents should be aware of. A detailed fortnightly newsletter keeps parents up to date on all aspects of school life.

The school is a member of the Association of Independent Junior Schools (AIJS).

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

Staffing at the school consists of the principal, 10 full time teachers and 4 part-time teachers. In addition, 8 full time and 20 part-time ancillary staff aid the smooth running of the school. The principal works collaboratively with the Headfort Trust to lead and manage all aspects of the education provision and school development. The Head of Teaching and Learning is cognisant of ensuring high standards of teaching and learning across the school. She oversees the school's curricular policies, which influence teaching and learning in the school.

A whole staff meeting takes place at the beginning of the academic year. Weekly teaching staff meetings, which take place on Tuesdays, provide a forum for discussion, for sharing of information and for the dissemination of school-related information. Curricular policies and plans are reviewed and updated regularly. Staff are encouraged to partake in continuous professional development (CPD) whenever feasible. Recent courses undertaken by staff include manual handling, first aid, and Children First training. Daily updates are disseminated through the online daily bulletin. All teachers are provided with an Employee Handbook, containing information on school policies and school life.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school is operational for 162 days per year plus 5 training days at the start of the year. An optional Breakfast Club can be availed of from 07:50 until 08:30 for an extra fee. Pupils can arrive at the school from 08:20, with morning walk beginning at 08:30. Teachers supervise on a rota basis. Collection time is at 15:00 for Infants up to 2nd form and 17:30 for 3rd and 4th form pupils. (3rd and 4th form pupils have the option of attending Junior Play until 18:00.) 5th and 6th form pupils finish at 18:00. On Fridays all pupils finish at 15:00. Younger pupils receive two breaks during the day. Pupils from 3rd form upwards receive a mid-morning break, a lunch break and an afternoon break each day. In class, teachers follow a timetable, which were submitted with the R2 application form. Attendance levels are described as very good.

Section 5 The Learning Environment

The school is situated on extensive grounds, which are surrounded by mature trees and plants. Pupils have access to a topiary garden, playing fields, wooded areas, stables, and horse-riding tracks within the grounds of the school. These grounds are impressively maintained by auxiliary staff. The house, in which the main body of the school is located, was constructed in the 1760s. The classrooms for pupils from junior and senior infants are located in the forge, which is separate from the main house. An attractive, safe and secure play area for junior classes is located behind the forge. Students have access to a wide range of both indoor and outdoor playing and sports facilities.

Classrooms are equipped with interactive white boards/screens, a class library, bean bags and a range of educational materials to support teaching and learning. Notice boards display work relating to current classroom activities and topics. Dedicated classrooms for art, Information Technology (IT) and science are utilised by pupils from 3rd form upwards. Pupils also have access to a school theatre. The school operates a low pupil-teacher ratio, enabling teachers to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of the child. Class sizes are capped at 20 pupils.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

The aims of the school, as stated on the website www.headfortschool.com are

- To provide an education like no other, fostering an environment in which children are able to learn, explore and play.
- To promote the educational development of each child, instilling confidence, and recognising individual strengths and talent.
- To encourage sound moral values, centred around compassion and kindness; attitudes and habits that promote diversity and that foster inclusion.
- To prepare each child for their future education, regularly placing pupils in top Irish and British Independent Schools.
- To foster resilience, critical thinking and problem solving: essential skills in the context of our new global environment.
- To be a school of educational excellence, by providing the highest level of academic attainment and development for each child.

Throughout the school the strands and strand units of the *Primary School Curriculum* are used to guide teaching and learning. Specialist teachers, as well as the inclusion of Latin, French and Spanish enhance the provision. The school places a strong emphasis on the teaching of virtues and discussing what they look like in everyday life. Whole school assemblies take place at the beginning and end of term, and as needed. A significant number of optional extras are available to pupils attending the school, including piano, guitar or drum lessons, cookery, choir, tennis, carpentry, pony riding, art and singing lessons.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

The comprehensive programme for language and literacy aims to develop oral language, reading and writing skills. The pupils' capacity to express themselves confidently and fluently is developed through participation in dramas and public speaking events. Using a thematic approach, structured play time that often incorporates thematic learning is implemented in junior classes. The Jolly Phonics programme is used in the infant classes to support the provision for the development of reading and writing skills. Novels are used in senior classes. Pupils also benefit from having access to both the school and class libraries. Reading areas, complete with comfortable bean bags, are present in

classrooms. Pupils learn to write across the genres, as they progress upwards through the school. Links have been established with a school in France, setting pupils up with French pen pals. Work in all areas of language and literacy is supported using appropriate textbooks from the *Starlight* series and *Go with the Flow* handwriting series. The development of spelling skills is also given due regard. Creative and child friendly initiatives such as the *Mystery Reader*, paired reading or reading with a past teacher and his reading dog, help children develop a love of literacy.

6.3. Numeracy

The content of the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* is covered in the school, with *Planet Maths* and *Maths My Way* used to support and guide learning. Staff focused heavily on discussing the teaching of maths during Induction Week. An audit of maths equipment was undertaken, and it was agreed to increase the use of concrete materials during lessons, with the aim of helping pupils develop an understanding of mathematical concepts and mathematical operations. Some Montessori materials are available in the school for pupil use. Station teaching is utilised as an effective teaching methodology to support pupils learning. Staff will avail of CPD in the new *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* in the new year. In line with the approaches used in this new curriculum, staff have agreed to increase the use of maths talk during lessons and are currently implementing this strategy. The numeracy provision is enhanced through participation in *Maths Week* events. Numeracy posters are displayed in the classrooms.

6.4. Irish

Irish is taught by class teachers from junior Infants up to 2nd form, while the head of teaching and learning teaches Irish to pupils from 3rd form upwards. Learning content is guided by the *Primary School Curriculum*. The development of oral language skills, in a fun and playful manner, is the primary focus in junior classes. In the senior classes oral language development is integrated with reading and writing. The textbook *Abair Liom*, as well as interactive online resources, are used to support learning. Irish is promoted through the creation of attractive displays in class. There are also plans afoot to organise *Seachtain na Gaeilge* events for all pupils to partake in.

In the factual accuracy and feedback form provided following the assessment, the principal added that pupils are taught thematic vocabulary and phrases across the ten Gaeilge themes, which they then use in structured writing and free writing activities. Games such as bingo, word tennis, and knockout are used to create an active and enjoyable learning atmosphere

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

Pupils are provided with a broad and balanced curriculum at Headfort School. Physical education (PE) comprises of varied outdoor activities and the considerable amount of time given to physical activity is a positive feature of the school. Pupils from 3rd form upwards partake in outdoor games for an hour and a half every day from Monday to Thursday. Activities offered throughout the year include rugby, basketball, cricket, soccer, hockey and rounders. Headfort school leagues in football, basketball and badminton are organised for the pupils. On campus, there is a horse-riding arena and a cross-country course for horses, which are used daily. Younger pupils receive two forty-minute PE classes each week. A number of optional extra sporting activities are also available to pupils. The recently renovated hangar is utilised for indoor sporting activities. An annual sports day takes place in the school.

Pupils learn about the importance of character values such as honesty, integrity and gentleness on a daily basis. Information on these virtues is included in the newsletter. Classroom rules and contracts

are on display in the classrooms. Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is included in the provision, with the *Busy Bodies* programme taught in 4th and 5th form, and an external speaker brought in to teach RSE to 6th form pupils. The student voice is supported and heard through the student council who meet weekly. Members are elected at the beginning of the academic year and are actively involved in improving the school. The *Stay Safe*, *Walk Tall* and *Weaving Wellbeing* programmes are taught in the school. Pupils are encouraged to adopt a growth mindset.

The school is fortunate to have a dedicated art room and a specialist art teacher. Pupils work with a wide variety of materials to develop their artistic talents. Examples of pupils' artwork is displayed and celebrated throughout the school. Seasonal themes are explored using a variety of media. The school newsletter keeps parents up to date on areas studied in the art curriculum.

Pupils enjoy timetabled classes in music, taught by a qualified music teacher. Extra private music lessons in singing, guitar, piano or drums are also on offer in the school. Pupils sing songs or learn music theory during music classes. The school has an active choir, which practises during school. Pupils sing in school concerts, partake in competitions or join in the *Peace Proms*. All pupils partake in school concerts and productions.

History, geography and science are explored using the *Small World* series to support and strengthen pupils learning in these areas. Work on the topics of *The Romans* and *World War 2*, as well as mapwork was observed during the assessment. A specialist Science teacher teaches science to 5th and 6th form pupils in the designated science laboratory. Pupils frequently partake in practical, hands-on science activities. Pupils also partake in nature walks, and observe the changing seasons, in the impressive school grounds.

A dedicated IT room is available for pupils use and an action plan for IT has been drawn up. Younger children's use of IT is limited but their exposure gradually increases as they progress up through the school. Pupils learn to access educational websites, use *Google* workspace and develop their typing and coding skills.

Latin, French and Spanish are taught in the school.

6.6. Special educational needs

Each child's needs are considered on a case-by-case basis to determine whether the school can cater for the child and meet their individual needs. Parents are asked to supply all relevant documentation and share any information about their child's special educational needs. If a child requires the support of a special needs assistant (SNA), this is privately funded by the parents of the child.

The majority of the children enrolled in the school can access the school's curriculum through purposeful differentiation of work in class. Additional support is available for those who are identified as having individual needs. This may take the form of one to one or small group teaching. Maths and reading programmes may be implemented if deemed beneficial in addressing the child's needs.

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Pupils learning is monitored on an on-going basis. Assessment is used to identify children with specific learning difficulties so that the appropriate steps can be taken to ensure progress is achieved despite difficulties which exist. A range of assessment methods are used including teacher observation, self-assessment, peer assessment, project work and teacher-designed tasks and tests.

Parent-teacher meetings take place twice per year, once in November and once in May. Parents who are living overseas can arrange an online meeting with their child's teacher. Two written reports and one progress report are issued annually. Standardised tests in English and numeracy are administered near the end of the school year. The school has an open-door policy, and parents are welcome to contact class teachers to make an appointment to discuss their child's progress.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Policies as requested by Tusla under the R2 Annual Update Form were provided, including the Child Safeguarding Statement and the Health and Safety Statement. All staff members have up to date basic first aid training, and the matrons and house parents have up to date First Aid Response (FAR) training. All staff members have been Garda vetted and have been trained in the implementation of *Children First*. All staff have completed the child safeguarding training. There is an appointed Designated Liaison person (DLP) and Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDL), and details are included in the Child Safeguarding Statement, which is prominently displayed as required.

Procedures as required and identified on the Child Safeguarding Statement were evidenced as in place and implemented. Information relating to Child Safeguarding is organised and accessible to staff as relevant.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

In my opinion, pupils attending Headfort School are in receipt of an education, intellectual, physical, moral, and social that meets requirements for Section 14 Registration for pupils attending the school.

The reasons I have formed this opinion of the education provision in the school are as follows:

- The strong communication between home and school.
- The learning environment, which consists of an impressive outdoor space, secure play areas and well-equipped classrooms.
- The positive working relationship which was evident between the principal, vice principal and staff during the assessment.
- The principal's effective leadership and management skills.

- The information provided by the principal and vice principal during the interview supplied a very comprehensive account of the school, its unique context and the curriculum on offer in the school.
- The efforts made to help each pupil develop confidence as an independent learner.
- The option to avail of the Senior 1 or EAL class which are on offer in the school.

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 10 Discussion of Finding of Report with Principal

The report was discussed with the principal at the conclusion of the visit on the 19th of November 2024. We discussed the procedures that would follow. It was stated that the recommendation would be to retain and register the pupils of Headfort School on the register. The final decision regarding registration will be made by the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Tusla, Child and Family Agency.

Section 11 Outcome

Outcome of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements for Section 14 Registration of Children Attending the School

Following the Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending Headfort 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