

V/S



Ardnashee SEN

School and College
Flexible learning case study



The School

Ardnashee SEN School and College – creating an inclusive environment for every learner

Ardnashee SEN School and College, located in Derry–Londonderry, is a new state-of-the-art facility designed to meet the long term educational needs of 275 pupils aged 3 to 19 with a wide spectrum of learning difficulties, from moderate to profound and multiple.

A £34 million investment, the new campus replaces outdated facilities and brings the whole school community together on one purpose built site. The ambition from the outset was to create an inclusive environment that provides every pupil with the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive within a safe and supportive setting.

Working closely with Headteacher Raymond McFeeters, staff, architects Samuel Stevenson, and project partners including Alpha and VS Furniture, the school helped shape a design vision that reflects the aspirations of students and families while also delivering against rigorous Department BB102 standards and sustainability benchmarks, achieving an Excellent BREEAM rating.

The new 8,815 square metre campus provides a comprehensive suite of modern learning spaces, including flexible classrooms, a hydro-therapy pool, two multi purpose halls, a gymnasium, and specialist suites for art, music, drama, technology and home economics. Sensory spaces, quiet breakout zones, and landscaped outdoor play areas enrich the environment further, ensuring a holistic approach to education and wellbeing.

At Ardnashee, the emphasis is on independence, inclusion and adaptability. The flexible nature of both the building and its interiors allows spaces to be reconfigured quickly, enabling a smooth transition between individual learning, group collaboration, and therapeutic activity. This adaptability is critical when supporting a student body with such varied needs across a broad age range.

The completion of Ardnashee SEN School and College provides the North West region with a modern, inclusive, and inspiring centre of learning – one that equips its students with the tools and confidence to fulfil their potential and prepares them for life beyond school.

Q&A

With Headteacher Raymond McFeeters



What were the key challenges Ardnashee faced in creating an inclusive learning environment for students with diverse needs?

Our students have a very wide range of physical, sensory, and cognitive needs. The challenge was creating spaces that could adapt quickly – one room might be used for quiet one-to-one support in the morning and then group collaboration later in the day. Traditional fixed furniture made it difficult to provide that level of flexibility.

How did VS furniture solutions address those challenges?

VS offered us ergonomic and flexible furniture that can be easily re-configured. Chairs and tables of different sizes, mobile storage, and height-adjustable desks mean we can tailor each space to the specific needs of our students. It has transformed our classrooms from being rigid spaces into environments that adapt around the learner.

Can you give an example of how this flexibility supports your students' learning on a daily basis?

One clear example is with our sensory learners. Staff can quickly move tables and chairs aside to create a calm breakout zone with soft seating, and then reset the room for structured group learning. This can happen within minutes, without disruption, so the focus remains on the child rather than the limitations of the space.

How has the furniture impacted staff experience and teaching practice?

Teachers tell me they feel liberated. They no longer have to work around the room – the room works around them. It has reduced physical strain, improved classroom management, and given them confidence to try new teaching approaches. The ease of movement and adaptability has made lessons flow much more smoothly.



Has VS's design approach helped promote student independence?

Yes, absolutely. Many of the products are lightweight, so students can move their own chairs or tables to set up for different activities. That small act of choice and responsibility has been very empowering, particularly for older students who are preparing for life beyond school.

How have students responded to the new environments created with VS furniture?

The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. Students are more engaged, calmer, and able to focus for longer. We've also noticed a reduction in behavioural incidents linked to frustration, because the environment now feels supportive rather than restrictive.

Were there any unexpected benefits gained from experimenting with furniture configuration options?

One pleasant surprise has been how often students themselves suggest new layouts. For example, arranging tables in a horseshoe shape for discussion or in clusters for project work. Giving them a say in the learning environment has encouraged ownership and collaboration.

What would you say to other SEN schools considering a similar investment in flexible learning furniture?

I would say: do not underestimate the impact of the environment on both learning and wellbeing. Investing in flexible, high-quality furniture has been one of the most effective ways we have supported inclusion and independence. It is not just furniture – it is a tool for teaching and a foundation for better outcomes.



The Architect

Samuel Stevenson Architects – shaping an inclusive future at Ardnashee SEN School and College



Clare Ogle, Samuel Stevenson Architects

As architect and lead designer for Ardnashee SEN School and College, our goal was to create flexible, inclusive spaces tailored to a diverse student body in coordination with Alpha in Belfast.

The new campus building covers approximately 10,500 square metres and was built for around £34 million. It is one of Northern Ireland's largest special education needs school delivered on behalf of the Education Authority and the Department of Education. It serves 275 students aged 3 to 19 with moderate, severe and profound, and multiple learning difficulties and features specialist facilities such as a hydrotherapy pool, multipurpose hall and dining room, a sports hall, and dedicated suites for therapy, art, music, drama, technology & design, and home economics. The design meets Department BB102 standards and achieves an excellent BREEAM rating.

We organised a visit to the VS Furniture showroom with the school team, which proved invaluable. Experiencing the furniture firsthand enabled us to select adaptable, ergonomic pieces that integrate seamlessly with the building's architecture.

The modular and lightweight solutions from VS now enable rapid room reconfiguration from calm breakout areas to dynamic group zones supporting independence, personalized learning, and wellbeing. Our collaboration with Alpha, has helped create an environment for the staff and pupils that enhances inclusion and learning outcomes, while also fostering growth and a strong sense of belonging.

The Partner

Alpha – creating flexible environments for Ardnashee SEN School and College

Alpha were appointed as the local partner to support the delivery of Ardnashee SEN School and College. Our responsibility was to translate the architectural vision into practical, functional spaces that would meet the diverse needs of pupils aged 3 to 19.

From the outset, our team worked closely with Samuel Stevenson Architects, the school leadership, and VS Furniture. We provided full space planning services, coordinating finishes and colours to achieve a consistent and welcoming environment across the campus. This attention to detail ensured that each room was not only visually coherent but also adaptable for a wide range of teaching and learning activities.

An important part of our role was guiding the school through the process of selecting the most suitable products from the VS range. By listening to staff and observing the day to day requirements of the pupils, we identified solutions that balanced ergonomics, flexibility and durability. The result was a furniture package tailored to the inclusive ethos of the school and aligned with the architectural design intent.

Alpha also managed the complete delivery and installation of the furniture. Our team coordinated logistics and on site fitting, ensuring that the transition into the new building was seamless for both staff and students.

The outcome is a series of flexible, inspiring learning environments where design and furniture work hand in hand. Spaces can be reconfigured quickly to support individual study, collaborative group work or therapeutic activity, helping to create a school that is truly inclusive and future ready.





The Furniture

VS – designing flexibility for inclusive learning

At Ardnashee SEN School and College, the ambition was to create a learning environment that could adapt as quickly as the needs of its pupils. For too long, classrooms have followed a rigid model — uniform rows of desks facing the teacher. This approach may work for some, but it fails to reflect the variety of ways in which young people learn.

Every learner is different. Some thrive in groups, others in quiet spaces. Some prefer practical, hands on tasks, while others are more responsive to visual media or abstract concepts. For pupils with special educational needs, these differences are even more pronounced, making flexibility in the learning environment absolutely essential.

VS Furniture's solution was to provide a range of adaptable, ergonomic products that allow teachers to change the layout of a classroom quickly and with minimal effort. Our Shift+ range in particular has been designed to support modern teaching practices, helping create environments where students can move seamlessly between individual focus, group collaboration, and therapeutic activity.

For Ardnashee, this flexibility has been transformative. Lightweight, mobile furniture gives staff the confidence to adjust their rooms to suit the moment — whether that means creating calm sensory spaces, setting up collaborative project areas, or arranging breakout zones for personalised support.

The result is a school where teaching is no longer constrained by the limitations of the room. Instead, the furniture actively supports inclusion, independence and creativity — providing every student with the opportunity to engage with learning in a way that works best for them.



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