



Castle Tower SEN School, Ballymena

Flexible Learning Case Study



The School.

Creating a new vision for education.

Castle Tower school complex, Ballymena, is a new state-of-the-art SEN (Special Educational Needs) learning facility. It is designed to cater for around 300 enrolled pupils aged between 3 and 19 years, with a variety of mental and physical learning difficulties.

In 2014, a business case was submitted and approved to build a new £21 million replacement facility for the old Castle Tower school, which would also amalgamate 3 other local SEN schools - Loughan School, Dunfane School and Beechgrove School, scheduled to open in 2017.

The desire for a new type of school combined with a lack of previous case-study examples, meant all initial project development had to begin with a completely blank slate. Headteacher Raymond McFeeters and key staff members worked closely with the architects and various stakeholders, carefully nurturing and shaping the project brief before approval - ensuring the end result would fulfil their exacting criteria.

The new school complex now provides a full range of comprehensive learning facilities. These include flexible classrooms, science labs, art and music rooms, a home-economics kitchen, lecture theatre and dedicated social areas. In addition, more specialist facilities such as a hydrotherapy pool, sensory spaces and outdoor play equipment is also available.

At Castle Tower, the aim is to provide the necessary tools to help pupils develop their individual potential, at the same time instilling a culture of life-long learning into adulthood. This is especially challenging when dealing with a wide age-range of pupils and the associated complexities of extremely varied learning capabilities. A truly flexible learning environment is vital for success.

Thanks to the new Castle Tower school complex, Mid and East Antrim can cement a reputation as an innovative, creative and flexible place of learning opportunities - where SEN pupils can realise their individual potential and prevail with confidence throughout adult life.



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Q&A

With Headteacher Raymond McFeeters.

When and how did you initially discover VS?

We were introduced to VS by a local furniture reseller called Alpha Office Furniture. We knew at first glance it was exactly what we were looking for. The feel and quality of the tables and chairs ticked all the boxes for our search criteria.

How successful were the trial classrooms and how did they influence the decision to use VS products throughout the entire Castle Tower project?

Before making such a large investment, we wanted to ensure the furniture met the needs of all our pupils. We purchased a classroom layout in the Shift+ range and trialled it for over 18 months before deciding it was the correct choice. We were able to let all our staff see the furniture in a classroom setting and allow our pupils to use it each day - ensuring it worked for everyone before a larger investment was made.

How did you secure funding for VS products, given they weren't initially listed on your 'framework agreement' for furniture procurement?

We basically knew that no other products fitted in with our scheme. Also, because we had previously purchased Shift+ furniture for a trial classroom, it was easier to demonstrate to everyone involved why VS products were so unique and important to our criteria.



“ We wanted to create an environment that challenged perceptions of what a school looks and feels like.



VS focuses on producing furniture ranges designed specifically for flexible learning environments. How effective has this proven to be since installation?

It is such a great feeling to walk between our classrooms and see the furniture set up in different layouts from one room to another. Previously, furniture didn't really move from one year to the next and in turn this hindered teaching and learning. The freedom VS shift+ furniture provides for our teachers is absolutely fantastic. The freedom to change the orientation of the learning environment quickly, as and when we need to, is now something we simply couldn't live without.

What has been the overall impression of VS products in practice, specifically from student and teacher perspectives?

Our pupils and teachers are extremely proud of their new school building and thoroughly enjoy it on a daily basis. We wanted to create an environment that challenged perceptions of what a school looks and feels like. Our classrooms and shared learning spaces are now truly inspiring places, but it doesn't just stop there - our corridors, courtyards and break out areas have all become exciting alternative learning spaces too. VS have made this possible with intelligent, flexible, design-lead furniture.



“ Our challenge was to translate the visions and aspirations of pupils and staff into a design solution that would enrich their experiences and learning environment.



The Architect.

Isherwood & Ellis. Arthur Sloan - Partner

In September 2013, Isherwood & Ellis were appointed to develop the new Castle Tower School (CTS), to cater for the long-term educational needs of its' pupils. Our goal was to replace and amalgamate the existing inadequate facilities, which were previously spread across 3 campuses in Ballymena - Loughan, Beechgrove and Dunfane.

For each campus, our architectural team spent valuable time conversing with pupils and staff on their visions and aspirations for their new school. The challenge was to translate these ideas into a working design solution that would enrich the learning environment - but also engage parents and have a positive impact on the wider Castle Tower community in general.

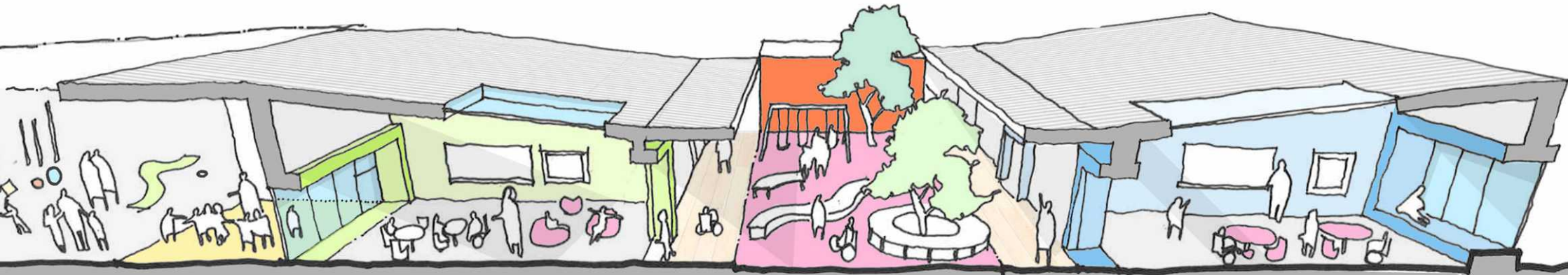
A range of recently completed mainstream and SEN schools were assessed - locally and in mainland GB. Also, European examples of not only best practice but 'next practice' schools were studied to inspire ideas that would allow the creation of a statement building for CTS - befitting one of the largest, most innovative SEN schools within the UK.

A unique aspect of the Special School sector is that it delivers a full educational provision across a wide age range from 3 to 19 years. In essence, a combined campus of Nursery, Primary, Secondary and Post 16 provision - covering a spectrum of moderate to complex special needs. The CTS Senior Management Team responded positively to our early and on-going engagement, establishing an in-house Design Review Group for all architectural queries and sketch proposals, as they were developed and presented.



The environmental quality at CTS is evident in the high levels of natural light, ventilation, thermal and acoustic provision. However, the impact as a learning environment is more subtle. Teaching is not restricted to the classroom - it permeates many of the adjacent and informal break out spaces, courtyards, covered areas and outdoor play areas. Each area is infused with a range of bespoke equipment, specifically designed to stimulate and educate the pupils in numerous, flexible ways.

The finished product is the outcome of a true collaboration involving Castle Tower's SMT, Governors, staff, pupils and parents - together with the Education Authority Property Services Team, the Department of Education, the Project Steering Group special needs advisors and the Design and Construction Team, led by Felix O'Hare. The rich exchange of thoughts and ideas arising from these engagements has been critical in the development of a truly bespoke Castle Tower solution - one of which Isherwood & Ellis are extremely proud of.





The Furniture.

Who is VS and what is our on-going mission?

Creating a flexible learning environment. What does that actually mean?

Firstly, it's important to challenge conventional thought on what a learning environment is, or should be. Traditionally, classrooms with uniform rows of desks, facing the teacher out front, has been the accepted format for many decades. It is a very 'one-dimensional' approach to teaching - effective for some, but not for others. The reality is, we all absorb information and learn in very different ways.

Some like to study in groups, some prefer solitude. Some learners like theory and abstract concepts, whilst others prefer a practical, hands-on approach. Some like to read, some prefer more visual media. There are a whole variety of learner needs that must be met in order for each individual student to benefit equally from education.

Our Shift+ range of educational furniture meets these varied needs head-on. It is designed to facilitate modern differentiated teaching practices and fully support the ever-changing curriculum. No longer should static, inflexible classroom furniture impose restrictions. Complete freedom to orientate the classroom layout to suit the learner needs - quickly and efficiently - is paramount.

Recognising how our bodies and minds work in harmony with the environment in which we learn is all part of an on-going development process for VS - where the goal is to provide unhindered flexibility to help individuals learn in a style unique to them.

We believe this is the key to creating a truly flexible, successful learning environment for all.







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