

PE1837/E

Autism Network Scotland submission of 5 January 2021

Clarify how autistic people, who do not have a learning disability and/or mental disorder, can access support.

Autism Network Scotland (ANS) hears of the challenges that autistic people have in accessing the right support. This has not improved significantly during the life of the Scottish Strategy for Autism and gaps in what people need still exist. For those with a learning disability or mental health disorder the gaps in accessing the right support, delivered by well-informed professionals. As described in the petition, those without a learning disability/mental health disorder still fall between the gaps in responsibilities of health and social care services.

Most of the supports that autistic people receive come from various support and health organisations and not from the specialist autism agencies who support a minority of autistic people in Scotland. ANS engages with a wide audience of autistic people and their families and also connect with autistic people's organisations. Having been involved in networking across Scotland throughout and before the Strategy, ANS would be delighted to provide further evidence with a solutions focus to the petitions committee in response to the issues.

In the Petitions Committee (16.12.20), Alexander Burnett MSP rightly referred to diagnosis as being the first important step to enabling the autistic person to lead their best life. Improvement in diagnosis has been a focus of the strategy from the beginning. However we continue to hear of difficult experiences of the process, length of time taken and people without a learning disability or mental health disorder not able to access diagnostic services. It would appear that despite the focus on diagnosis and funds allocated to this, the experience for many has not improved.

A positive change is that how to diagnose is now largely understood. As evidenced in the recent Autism Strategy conference organised by ANS, the challenge is now about carrying out the diagnostic process. As such it is a systems, organisation and resource challenge, not a lack of knowledge. Therefore resources and effort should be channelled appropriately. Scottish Government continues to fund the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) to lead on this work. This has not been evaluated and misses the importance of a Scotland wide approach inclusive of investigating the areas that have made huge practical improvements in diagnosis and waiting times (e.g. the Glasgow Adult Diagnostic Team).

Mr Burnett suggested inviting National Autistic Society and Autism Scotland to input into the debate. Whilst both have much to offer, ANS is willing to contribute their Scotland and organisation wide network perspective.

Allocate investment for autism support teams in every local authority or health and social care partnership in Scotland

The Scottish Government provides the policies, frameworks and resources that allows services to meet the needs of the entire population. However at times, autism specific knowledge, resources, and interventions are needed to enable autistic people to be equally served.

The petitioner's proposal may be one such time when resources need to be redirected to allow autistic people equality of service. ANS is similarly placed to engage with a range of statutory and third sector partners to support existing services to be better informed and enabled to meet the needs of autistic people and their families.

Mr Burnett also referred to the National Mapping project. This was completed some years ago and unless the individual Local Authority has committed to maintaining their local service maps, they will be out of date. ANS engages with the Local Authorities/HSCP's across Scotland and we are not aware of these local maps being used or providing useful information. ASN facilitates the network of Local Authority autism lead officers and this is an easy and practical way in understanding the local context for autistic people as well as sharing best practice nationally. The gap between national strategy and local implementation, highlighted in the Autism CPG 'Accountability Gap' report, needs to be resolved before any national strategy can have a significant local impact.

The most positive action of the Autism Strategy over the last 10 years is the very recent launch of the Autism Understanding campaign 'Different Minds, One Scotland'. Autistic people and families recognise that the biggest improvement in the lives of autistic people occurs when there is better, wider understanding, not just from professionals but within the general public. The daily interactions with the bus driver, the hospital nurse, the shopkeeper are where a real difference to the quality of life and human rights of an autistic person are made.

Given the role that ANS can take in delivering the priorities of autistic people in Scotland, some of which is described above, the Scottish Government's recent decision to end the funding to ANS (whilst funding to other key strategy delivery partners continues) is short sighted and flawed.