

Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care submission of 17 June 2022

PE1837/DD: Provide clear direction and investment for autism support

Thank you for your letter of 16th May requesting greater clarity on the following matters:

- what specific support is currently available for those individuals who have autism but do not have a learning disability or a mental disorder?
- how and when the Scottish Government will clarify with service providers which services are designed to support those individuals? and
- of the recent pilots, how many are expected to be fully rolled-out across Scotland, and what the timescale and potential phasing for this is?

Please assure the Committee that the Scottish Government continues to be committed to improving the lives of autistic people in Scotland. We are driving forward a range of work to support this aim and, to this end, I will address each of these issues in turn below.

- what specific support is currently available for those individuals who have autism but do not have a learning disability or a mental disorder?

As the Committee is aware, there is statutory support available through local Social Care provision. Autistic people who meet eligibility criteria and do not have a learning disability or mental health condition will have access to this support. While the Scottish Government has overall responsibility for Health and Social Care policy in Scotland, it is Local Health Boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) which have the responsibility for providing and commissioning appropriate

services to meet their population's needs. This will include support through autism specific providers.

Although some people's needs will be met through these statutory services, we acknowledge other support is often required for autistic adults and that this currently varies considerably across Scotland. The Scottish Government has recognised the need for greater consistency in the provision of non-statutory support for autistic people. This includes autistic people without a learning disability or a mental health condition.

To address this, we are conducting an adult neurodevelopmental pathway pilot as outlined in my previous letter of December 2021 and we have also invested in post diagnostic support. The post diagnostic support has now been extended until March 2023 and we intend to embed this more widely across Scotland going forward, alongside a new national digital resource hub which we have begun to develop. In tandem, we will be considering the longer term options that could build on the pathway pilot work. As part of this work we will engage further with HSCPs around their current activities.

In my last letter I described our post diagnostic support pilots which have been operating since December 2020. Although the seven organisations involved are working mainly with those diagnosed in the last few years, they are providing direct support to autistic people of all ages and their support is open to all autistic people seeking advice and support. They are not limited to those who may also have a learning disability or mental health issue. All but two of these organisations provide national support ranging from an advice line, chat facilities on websites, information hubs, 1 to 1 support sessions, peer support and a series of group sessions. This support is available now. The two local provisions provide autistic-led support in the Highlands and Central Belt specifically.

Since my last letter, the evaluation of the first six months of these pilots has been published. This tells us that autistic people and parents of autistic children did feel the support received was helpful. It assisted them when dealing with services; they knew where to get help and that help was accessible to them; they felt more connected to the autistic community and less isolated; they had greater confidence and were better informed; they understood themselves better and felt their mental health had improved.

As I've indicated, funding for this post-diagnostic support work has been extended until at least March 2023 in recognition of its continuing value and the high demand for support. This marks over £1m of funding in this area since 2020.

On your next point:

- how and when the Scottish Government will clarify with service providers which services are designed to support those individuals?

I am disappointed to hear that autistic people are being passed from service to service without receiving the help they need. Local services have a duty to assess support needs in their areas and are required to provide appropriate support. This will include those who are autistic and do not have a learning disability or a mental health condition. I am happy to write to HSCPs to remind them of their obligations and urge them to put in place services that will address the needs of autistic people. There is a need to ensure each service takes responsibility at the point the autistic individual reaches out; rather than to suggest that only one service is relevant to their needs.

There is good practice to draw from. We are aware of providers who support autistic people well locally, including statutory and third sector support services which are designed specifically for autistic people and recognise the ongoing need for support, whenever autistic people need it throughout their life.

As part of the post diagnostic support work, we are currently developing a national web Hub. This is intended to provide everyone - professionals, the public and autistic people alike - with a single source of information on autism support services. It will signpost a range of resources and services which practitioners can point to to assist individuals to embrace their identity as an autistic person and seek the level of help they need, at whatever point they feel they need it. The Hub is supported by an advice line with an additional on-line chat function which will offer advice and direction. We aim for this Hub to be active in the next few months and we will urge service providers to share it with those coming to them for assistance.

On your final point:

- of the recent pilots, how many are expected to be fully rolled-out across Scotland, and what the timescale and potential phasing for this is?

Our work on adult neurodevelopmental diagnostic pathways, in conjunction with the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT), is in its early stages and progress will continue throughout this year. The pilot work started in January 2022 and will be completed in December 2022. NAIT will provide a report on learning from pilot sites and recommended next steps in March 2023.

This work is key to our consideration of longer term options so we will be very focused on its outcomes. Plans for wider roll out of this work will follow after consideration of the evaluation report.

However, this does not prevent us from taking action now in the form of the national Hub and the nationally supported post diagnostic support work set out above. I am determined to enhance the support available.

I hope this provides the Committee with further reassurance that efforts are underway to address the issues raised in this petition and I am happy to offer additional information and support as required.