

## **PE1704/S**

Dumfries and Galloway Council submission of 30 May 2019

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that an agenda of real and meaningful change for autistic people is pursued by introducing 4 targets and outcomes by 2021. The response from Dumfries and Galloway Council and the Dumfries and Galloway Health and Care Partnership regarding each individual target/outcome, is detailed below.

- 1. That every person in Scotland going through an autism diagnostic procedure will be assessed within a calendar year and receive a statutory services assessment from a qualified social worker as an integral part of this process, within twelve months from the date of their initial referral.***

Currently the process for autism diagnosis commences with our health colleagues, and due to challenges in terms of availability of resource, can take some time. The target of diagnostic assessment within one year, however positive, would only be achievable if sufficient health professionals were available to meet demand.

All referrals received by the Local Authority are screened in line with our legislative duties and eligibility criteria. Our focus is always to support self-determination and choice, therefore we support self-assessments, where this is appropriate. Currently the allocation of work is considered according to complexity and risk. SDS assessments and transitions are completed by experienced Care Co-Ordinators as well as Social Workers and this is dependent on the level of complexity and associated skill required to undertake the task. It would therefore not be proportionate for non-complex, low risk, assessments to be undertaken by qualified Social Workers.

Due to a number of factors it has been recognised locally that the service requires to be refreshed and to this end, in 2017, a multi-agency group was formed to create a new and different Neurodevelopmental Assessment and Diagnostic Service. This group has been advised and supported by the Mental Health Access Improvement Team (MHAIST) which assists NHS Scotland Boards to apply improvement methodology and to develop data capability to measure and demonstrate improvement in services. This new approach is currently in the final stages of development. The objective is that by the end of 2019, all children and young people under the age of 18 with non-complex presentations will have a diagnosis within 12 weeks of referral and those with more complex presentations by 26 weeks which falls well within the suggested timescale in the petition.

This diagnosis process will not automatically include a statutory service assessment by a Social Worker, although, in principle, there is no reason why the clinicians involved could not seek the permission of the individual to involve Social Work Services. Not all people in the diagnostic pathway either want or need Social Work involvement and, for some, the very fact that the process involves an assessment

could dissuade them from proceeding, potentially to their detriment and others around them.

**2. *That children with autism in mainstream schools will have their assessed needs for classroom support met by an ASL assistant with a recognised autism qualification as part of a mandatory registration process for ASL professionals.***

The petition statement appears to suggest that all children with an autism diagnosis will be supported by an ASL assistant. To suggest that the solution to better autism support and understanding can be delivered in a “one size fits all” approach denigrates the findings of research, much of it based on the voices of those with autism and their families: that individual people need individual solutions. Not all children or young person benefit from having an assistant with them and their needs are met in a variety of ways. In addition, with nearly 400 children in our schools with a diagnosis, recruiting sufficient staff would be very difficult, if not impossible. To require these staff to have a recognised autism qualification would not be helpful and would have a significant impact on the recruitment and retention of staff as well as to their flexibility of deployment within schools. Reference to research (DISS) shows that access to teachers should be prioritised and that without very careful planning learning assistants can create barriers between learners and teachers, which ultimately disadvantage pupils with additional support needs.

Dumfries and Galloway Council has a commitment to providing training in autism. To this end, the authority developed an E-Learning Autism Awareness Module that has a distinct regional feel that is to become mandatory for all school staff. This is freely available to all staff, not just those who are school-based and to the whole of the population through the NHS Education website. Teaching and non-teaching staff are reminded about The Autism Toolbox and have regular opportunities to access training on a wide range of autism-related topics from sleep issues to social stories. We have, for example, over 300 trained staff in Lego Therapy. We also provide training programmes for parents and carers and monthly drop-in sessions across the region. In addition, Educational Psychologist, the Autism Outreach Service and Speech & Language Therapists provide bespoke training for individual schools and other parts of the Council, such as the Museum Service and Active Sports

**3. *That young adults with autism will have a statutory right to specialist support from their local authority up to the age of 25.***

Many autistic adults can manage their lives without the need for statutory services and many resist statutory involvement for fear of being labelled. Furthermore, not all people with autism will have an eligible or assessed need. Consequently, introducing this as a statutory right for all young adults with autism would be at odds with our current legislative duties and eligibility criteria. If introduced, it would need to be clear that it was for those who require that level of support.

Whilst in school, children and young people are supported by the “Getting it Right for Every Child” (GIRFEC) processes. Whilst it is acknowledged that leaving school is not always a positive experience for a few young people, schools and other

providers work hard to ease the journey. After school, accessing support as a young adult is more difficult, but to enshrine that support as a statutory requirement of an authority would have significant practical and resources implications. In addition, in a large rural area such as Dumfries & Galloway, providing an equitable service to all young people would be almost impossible and could not be achieved within existing resources.

***4. That an Autism Act will be in place within the next 5 years to enshrine specific rights and services for autistic people in our legal system.***

There are already a number of statutory frameworks that protect the interests of people with autism, for example, the Additional Support for Learning Act, the Equality Act. Mental health and disability legislation is also relevant and the main factor why legislation in Scotland for autistic people was discounted in 2011. Given other initiatives in the areas of adult support and protection and learning disability, it is difficult to see what purpose further legislation aimed at one group would achieve. In addition, any new statutory duties and expectations would have to take due account of the capacity of authorities to deliver against a background of geography, sparse populations in many areas and resources including staffing. In order to have any significant impact, any new legislation would need to be backed by further guidelines and funding.