



Cross-Party Autism Group

Minutes

Friday 14th June, 09:30 - 11:00 am Microsoft Teams

Present: Mark Isherwood MS (Chair), James Radcliffe (acting Secretary - NAS), Hefin David MS, Kirsty Rees, Charlotte Owens, Hannah Carrington, James Cusack, Denise Mckernan, Nigel Morgan

Apologies: Kerrie Hopwood, Kate Thomas, Kara Monkiewicz, Julie Meese,

1. Welcome

Mark Isherwood MS welcomed everyone to this meeting of the Senedd's Cross-Party Autism Group.

2. Minutes of previous meeting and election of new secretary

A decision to agree the minutes of the Cross-Party Autism Group meeting held on 22nd January as a true and accurate reflection was deferred until the next meeting. JR was also formally elected as the new Secretary of the cross-party group.

3. Correspondence from Welsh Govt

JR gave an overview of the background to this correspondence, that arose from the January 2024 meeting of the cross-party group on Autism. He explained that members of the cross-party group had agreed to write to the minister regarding

concerns raised in that meeting regarding practices in a specific local authority. The Welsh Government had responded, noting that it had contacted CIW regarding those concerns. CIW noted that these issues had been directly reported to them and whilst they cannot investigate specific complaints, they are considered when the performance of local authorities is reviewed.

The letter noted that an inspection was undertaken last year which found the Local Authority was well sighted on market stability in its area and the needs of the population, there were examples of the local authority implementing successful strategic plans in response to identified need and the lack of some support services in its area. CIW advised they would continue to monitor the local authority. They did however identify 4 areas for improvement in relation to support for ND children and parents of ND children. The WG also outlined its commitment to carry out an evaluation of its code of practice within 2 years of implementation and encouraged the cross-party group to feed into that evaluation.

A discussion followed from this, with MI noting that he had circulated the response to people who spoke in the previous meeting who responded that the correspondence with WG simply reconfirmed their lack of faith and trust in the system.

MI also noted he had a separate response from CIW (to his own letter) that detailed the generic work they did but emphasised their role is not to deal with individual cases. MI noted that from the correspondence it would appear that any such matters would have to be presented as a generic problem impacting on many people rather than as individual cases or a small number of cases in order to get the regulatory bodies to become involved. A discussion on this matter took place, and JR suggested writing to CIW collating examples of the issues that had been raised.

4. Access to Employment – experiences of Autistic people

The group had two presentations from autistic people who outlined their experiences in trying to secure employment.

Charlotte Owens began her presentation by noting that people have different operating systems but are equal. She said she did not need help changing her CV as the issue was the attitudes of employers towards her community. She highlighted examples of her being declined for jobs that included the reasons of her not being a smoker, and not living in the area.

Hannah Carrington then spoke about her experiences of mental health and unemployment following a difficult experience at university. She noted how the focus from many support services was on mental health not whether she might have had autism. A few years ago, she found Kim Inspire, at first as a client, and then as a volunteer. They helped her learn new skills and she is now employed with them. Prior to having a diagnosis 2 years ago that explained things, she still struggled and she is fortunate to have colleagues that understand neurodiversity and have belief in herself.

Following the presentations, a detailed discussion took place. Hefin David posted a link to a report he had written for the Welsh Government on improving employment outcomes and spoke about the importance of a specialist job coach. JR agreed to circulate a copy of the report to the cross-party group.

MI highlighted research from Kim Inspire that was used to secure funding to start a project supporting ND women. HC then explained about the project further, explaining that it helps people identify their strengths and helps with well-being. MI also highlighted a further report from the WI and suggested that both these reports could be discussed at a further meeting.

MI then asked the speakers about existing provision they may have accessed. CO explained that she felt the issue was that employers were turning people down for often spurious and stupid reasons. HC explained she hadn't as her existing employers had responded brilliantly, and she had been fortunate enough not to need support as a result.

There followed a discussion about further support with further suggestions of support in the area. NM suggested we should push the disability confident scheme more (although he warned level 1 is a tick box exercise). NM agreed to send to JR details of a forthcoming event in North Wales that could be circulated.

DM asked about support for Men and Boys. She also noted some services require social services referral to access them, which creates a barrier for some families. She then noted Flintshire social services just do generic assessments and don't understand disability. MI suggested that as the meeting was short of time, these issues should be discussed further at a future meeting. HD suggested Engage to Change should be invited, and the group should gather all the good practice together. JR said this could be done and agreed to write to WG and UK Govt collating this good practice.

5. The Buckland Report

JC gave a brief presentation about the Buckland review and how Autistica became involved in that work. Over the course of 10 months they interviewed and worked with autistic people and a range of stakeholders to develop the recommendations in that report. He noted the report takes a practical approach that largely focuses on how to get employers to change their attitudes and approaches to recruitment. It recommends how they can be enabling not acting as a barrier in increasing employment, but also how autistic people can be supported in the workplace and progress in their career.

JC also noted that the more inclusive language of Neuro-Diversity (ND) is what is helping. It means employers are seeing autistic people within the context of a diverse workforce and how they can help with an organisation's performance. He noted that current recruitment practices are ineffective, so they campaign for changes to these processes –and this benefits everyone not just those with autism.

HD then thanked JC for the presentation and MI noted we could reference Buckland in our letter to WG

6. Update on Stolen Lives

HD noted that Dawn Cavanagh – the founder of the Stolen Lives Campaign - was unable to attend. They have been working with the cross-party group on learning disability – chaired by Sioned Williams MS. HD suggested that as there was considerable overlap in the campaigns, it was better to work together in one place to make it a more powerful campaign.

JR agreed to add this to agenda and discuss with Sioned Williams MS about her attending next meeting.

7. Any other business and closing remarks

MI also noted that some dislike the term neurodivergence, a question was asked on name change of group. JR noted that NAS is aware of the differing views on this subject and he would raise it with NAS.

DM noted she meets regularly with NW police and can raise issues (through MI)

DM noted that Leeds Council has an autism team that is used to educate social workers, teachers etc on autism, and this stops parental blame. MI asked if JR could capture this in correspondence with Welsh Govt as an example of good practice. JR was also asked to ask DM to send details of Leeds team

JR confirmed the next meeting would take place on 19th September.