



Welsh Parliament
Cross-party Autism Group

Minutes
Monday 13 December, 10.30am-noon
Virtual meeting

Present: Mark Isherwood MS, Heledd Fychan MS, Carolyn Thomas MS, Rachel Brown, Julie Annetts, Sarah Broadhurst, Felicity Stephenson, Davina Carey-Evans, Ruth Rabet, Chris Haines, Marie James, Samantha Lambert-Worgan, Catherine Vaughan, Frances Rees, Einir Price, Rob Newton-Miller, Tim Nicholls, Elaine Jennings, Amanda Daniels, Kirsty Jones, Gemma Jones, Aoife Pryor, Amanda Evans, Beth Edwards, Claire Bullock, Caroline Rawson, Jacquelyn Elias, David Davies, John Price, Kieran Fraser, Leanne Mathers, Kelly Preston and Dan Rose

Apologies: Delyth Jewell MS, Keith Ingram, Diane Bracegirdle, Nick Davies, Claire Morgan, Wendy Thomas, Karen Shepherd and Michal Blochowiak.

1. Welcome and Introduction

Mark Isherwood MS welcomed everyone to the first public meeting of the Cross-party Autism Group during the Sixth Senedd term.

Group secretary

MI accepted Tim Nicholls' resignation as secretary, thanking him for his work in helping to re-establish the group. Members agreed Chris Haines, the National Autistic Society's new external affairs manager for Wales, as his replacement.

2. Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism Services

Julie Annetts, head of Welsh Government's learning disability, autism and neurodevelopmental conditions team, gave an update on the [Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism services](#). She outlined work to align policy by removing silo working, fostering collaboration, promoting integration and identifying gaps. JA provided an overview of ministerial responsibilities, explaining that Eluned Morgan, the Minister for Health and Social Services, is supported by two deputies. Julie Morgan is Deputy Minister for Social Services, with responsibility for autism policy, while Lynne Neagle is Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Well-being.

JA told the group that policy priorities include implementation of the statutory autism code as well as a new integrated all-age neurodevelopmental conditions plan. She highlighted the ongoing demand and capacity review of neurodevelopmental services and work to build on the Together for Children and Young People programme. JA explained that policy will focus on co-production, data improvement, workforce development, sustainable long-term improvement, strategic buy-in, and integrated, cross-cutting services.

Frances Rees, from the National Autism Team (NAT), highlighted the information available on its website, autismwales.org. Her colleague, Kirsty Jones, introduced herself, saying she has joined the NAT in a role focused on implementation of the code. Jacquelyn Elias welcomed Welsh Government's move to widen the focus to other neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD as well as autism.

MI raised some concerns about services in North Wales, criticising the poor treatment of parents and a culture of blaming autistic people. Catherine Vaughan echoed his concerns about children being wrongly removed from autistic parents. She cautioned that parenting is too often assessed from a neurotypical perspective. FR highlighted the NAT's work to upskill social workers, increase understanding of neurodiversity, and tackle deep-seated stereotypes. Anna Cole gave a parent's perspective, raising concerns about a lack of support in secondary school for her 18-year-old daughter. Raising concerns about a lack of support for children transitioning to adult services, parents also cautioned that their input is often overlooked once a child turns 18. Carolyn Thomas MS raised the importance of support for families and teachers. JA highlighted the new additional learning needs system which is being phased in with the aim of transforming provision. Responding to a question about the prevalence of autism and other ND conditions, MI pointed out that about 1% of the population is autistic.

3. Autism Education Trust

Dr Sarah Broadhurst, director of the Autism Education Trust (AET), gave an overview of the AET's work in England. She explained that the partnership organisation was established in 2007 by two founder members, the National Autistic Society and Ambitious About Autism. Dr Broadhurst highlighted three key principles for the AET: one, seeing autism as a difference – not a deficit; two, including the voice of autistic children; and three, local partnership. She told the group that the AET works mostly in mainstream education settings in England. SB said the AET has developed eight good autism practice principles and research-led standards frameworks for early years, schools and post-16. She added that the AET has competency frameworks to help professionals understand what good practice looks like. She invited views on the AET's plans to work with local stakeholders to develop a similar standards framework for the Welsh context.

FR outlined some of the NAT's [resources for education settings](#) from early years to further education, in line with CIW and Estyn's inspection framework. She highlighted the NAT's [autism aware certification scheme](#). JA said Welsh Government officials would be happy to discuss the framework with the NAT. Elaine Jennings raised concerns about slow progress in improving understanding

of autism in schools. MI suggested training needs to move beyond awareness towards understanding, acceptance and empowerment.

4. Good Practice Guide

Felicity Stephenson, policy officer and parliamentary officer, gave an overview of the NAS [good practice guide](#) for mental health professionals. She told the group that autism is not a mental health condition but many autistic people develop mental health problems after being pushed to crisis point. FS said a survey of 1,500 autistic adults showed nearly all had experienced anxiety and 83% reported experiencing depression. She explained that interviews and focus groups with autistic people and mental health professionals helped identify practical changes and reasonable adjustments. FS suggested the guide could be used to improve autistic people's access to mental health services in Wales.

Marie James, chair of the Carmarthenshire NAS branch, asked about reasonable adjustments for people who cannot access in-person services. FS stressed the importance of person-centred planning and encouraging parental support, saying many of principles apply equally to virtual consultations. She said more research is needed on best practice in terms of higher support needs. MI raised concerns about the misconception that autism is a mental health problem. CV said she would forward the good practice guide to practitioners and include it in training for mental health teams. FR said the NAT would share the guide on its website, social media, and across the Integrated Autism Services. JA added that Welsh Government would send the guide to mental health policy colleagues.

5. Piws

Davina Carey-Evans gave a presentation about [Piws \(Purple\)](#), a project which aims to create a more accessible Wales. By working with venues and the community, the project raises the profile of the barriers faced by autistic people and those with other disabilities, and supports businesses to overcome them. DCE said Piws – which will offer website and premises access audits, secret shoppers, training, access cards and quality marks – has plans a full roll-out in March 2022.

6. Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

Ruth Rabet provided an overview of the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower scheme](#) – a discreet way for someone to choose to indicate that they are living with invisible disabilities. She told the meeting that more than 10 million people in the UK alone have an invisible disability. RR explained that since its launch in 2016, the sunflower has been adopted globally and is recognised by many airports, supermarkets, railway stations, leisure facilities, and public services.

7. Any other business / Closing remarks

MI informed attendees that the next meeting would be held on Monday 7 March from 10.30am to noon. Closing the meeting, he thanked the speakers and all who attended before wishing everyone a merry Christmas and happy new year.