



Cross-Party Autism Group

Minutes

Thursday 22nd May 2025 ,14:00 - 15:30 pm Microsoft Teams

Present: Mark Isherwood MS (Chair), James Radcliffe (Secretary - NAS), Julian Morgan, Mitchell Bradley Williams, Denise McKernan, Rhian Connick, Nigel Morgan, Sarah Thomas, Sarah Morgan, Beth Rees, Lee Green, Kara Monkiewicz, Chad Rickard, Julie STAND, Kerrie Hopwood,

Apologies: Llyr Gruffydd, Claire Merrin

1. Welcome

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

2. Minutes of previous meeting

Julian Morgan (JM) proposed the minutes and Denise Mckernon (DM) seconded the minutes.

3. Matters arising

JR explained there were a few matters arising.

On the issue of home education it had been agreed to send a letter to the minister, which had been sent. However, no reply to that letter has been received. Secondly, it had also been agreed to write to the minister on the issue of fabricated and Induced Illness (FI), and that letter was also sent. Again, no reply had been received. MI also raised the issue in the chamber.

Finally, JR noted the authors of the papers noted in the previous meeting had been invited to present at this meeting but were unable to attend.

DM commented on the impact of FII on families and requested DCI Curry of North Wales police to present at a future meeting. JR confirmed that an invitation had been made

4. Thinking Differently, Sarah Thomas, National Federation of Women's institutes.

Sarah Thomas (ST) presented on the WI's campaign 'thinking differently'. This is a campaign that aims to raise awareness of autism and/or Adhd amongst girls and women and to tackle long waiting times for diagnosis. She highlighted how 'masking' was a particular issue for women and girls linked to poorer health outcomes. As part of the campaign, The WI is also hosting awareness days, educating its members, and taking steps to become more inclusive.

It has also published research of the experience of autistic women, involving a survey and qualitative research. The research found that 66% of respondents felt society does not accept autistic people, 50% felt educational opportunities had been limited because of autism and 83% said their employment opportunities had been limited. Survey respondents also highlighted issues in healthcare, accessing a diagnosis,

Sarah concluded by highlighting recommendations from the campaign that included calls for better training of healthcare professions, more flexible working and creating a more supportive environment.

Beth Rees (BR) asked how the campaign was doing in relation to reaching out to employers. ST explained she was doing research on good practice in employment and hoped the WI would take the campaign forward.

Lee Green (LG) commented that the figures showed that work needed to be done and commended the WI for the campaign.

Nigel Morgan (NM) highlighted that Betsi Cadwaladr were making good progress in recruitment and retention of autistic people. He noted that whilst some employers regarded better recruitment as a tick box exercise there were also employers genuinely committed to supporting autistic people. He then asked about whether the survey asked Welsh Language speakers as he would be interested in whether their experience was different. ST said the survey didn't capture that data but they knew it was an issue.

DM noted her GP surgery is very progressive, and had invited her to speak to them to see what changes they could do. She asked who had that role in the NHS as her GP service didn't know. ST said there was a lack of awareness and that the WI would also like all health professionals to be trained on autism. MI said that Autism Cymru provides a training package on autism awareness online but that going through it doesn't necessarily mean a person has autism understanding. He argued that can only be achieved when the training includes people with lived experience. He also noted that unfortunately within health boards autism is often subsumed into the Mental Health units, which can lead to conceptualising autism as mental illness when it is not.

JM noted that the phrase 'challenging behaviour' is problematic and the issue is unmet needs, particularly amongst women and girls. He noted that one issue in the public sector is the move towards 'neuro-diversity' which groups together a lot of different presentations and a lot of different needs. This leads to the problem that organisations claiming to have 'ND training' are not able to specifically accommodate the needs of autistic people. He also noted there are lots of trainers with lived experience able to do good training.

Julie Mears (JM) noted that STAND delivered training to employers that included people with lived experience and workshops. The training did result in some employers changing processes to make jobs more accessible, but she agreed a lot more work needs to be done. NM noted that JM had undersold how successful that conference had been, and suggested ST tap into JM's contacts in North Wales.

MI also noted the work done by Kim Inspire in supporting ND women and girls.

LG commented that the onus shouldn't be on autistic people to educate people, which is too often the case, and we need to move away from that. JM said it was important that people were not asked to give the training for free, and that the expectation that autistic people would do so was part of the problem.

MI concluded this section.

5. The Trummies project, Sarah Morgan, National Autistic Society

Sarah Morgan (SM) introduced the presentation by explaining the Swansea Branch of the National Autistic Society (NAS) were unable to attend this meeting, so she would present on their behalf. She introduced Trummies as emerging from Autism Acceptance Week as a way of introducing autism to children. The trummies are characters who help introduce children to autism and different ways of reacting to the world. It was popular with the branches who continued and developed the project, and have worked in schools to increase understanding of autism. The material is very much owned by the branches rather than the National Autistic Society.

She showed a video that was shown in one school to illustrate the material and then explained the wider role of the branches and peer support project.

DM welcomed the project and said she hoped to see it used more widely.

NM also praised the project.

SM explained that the branches are looking to develop more characters as part of the trummies project.

JM also praised the project but highlighted that the presentation contained a watermark of the school's logo which makes it difficult for some autistic people to read. SM acknowledged this.

MI praised the project as a simple idea that meets a real need and asked about its use in other branches. SM explained further about the branch network and how NAS co-ordinates good practice and that Trummies is also going to Scotland as well.

6. Update on Stolen Lives Task and Finish Group, James Radcliffe, National Autistic Society

JR gave a re-cap about what the Stolen Lives Campaign was about and how it had led to the Welsh Government establishing a task and finish group. He explained the group was finalising recommendations to be made, but that it was important the group recognised that any recommendations would also have to be implemented. He highlighted recent concerns that there appeared to be a lack of awareness in Welsh Government that the task and finish group was set up to address the issue – pointing out some recent comments in the media by a Welsh Government spokesperson denying that there was an issue with people being inappropriately detained. JR noted the concern that this meant silo thinking may impact the ability to implement the recommendations.

He also highlighted that many recommendations may take longer to be implemented, and thus the group had to consider the election and influencing of all political parties.

He noted that Nigel Morgan (NM) had also wanted a discussion on the disabled people's rights plan, which was out for discussion. JR briefed on some of the content of that plan, and opened matters for discussion.

JM noted the statistics on people in Mental Health units in England had doubled in recent years and asked how Welsh figures compared. He noted one of the issues was that Mental Health departments in the NHS tended to also include autism despite autism not being a mental health condition. He also asked about independent living.

MI noted that the WG also puts autism alongside mental health in its cabinet responsibilities.

DM noted social services do not have clear procedures for supporting autistic peoples, and this can lead to many failures. She had spoken to Martin Shipton of Nation Cymru who had written extensively on this.

Beth Rees (BR) noted that LDW had done a lot of work on this and she was aware of the Stolen Lives campaign and that it was really important.

7. AOB

Some actions were agreed: ST had spoken to WG on the work they were doing. ST wanted more awareness of the work and tackling diagnosis waiting times. It was

agreed to write to the minister on the WI campaign, and in relation to the gaps on autism training raised during that discussion

JR noted the actions regarding Stolen lives would depend on what happens with the recommendations and ensuring they were implemented. He also answered the question JM had asked on data – saying that although the data wasn't published the task and finish group had seen data saying detentions had risen.

The provisional date for the next meeting was agreed for 2nd October