

Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Petition number: [P-05-0761](#)

Petition title: **Demand Funding from the Welsh Government to Support Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru**

We call for the Welsh Assembly Government to give funding to support Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru.

This charity is unique in Wales. Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru currently receives no government funding. It depends entirely on funding from sources that aren't necessarily able to permanently support it.

This unique open drop-in centre plays an important role in improving the lives of people living with autism in Wales.

We would like to seek reassurance from the Welsh Assembly Government that this charity will always remain open and fully funded.

Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru and autism policy in Wales

Introduction

Autism is a developmental condition which affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with other people. It is a spectrum condition, and therefore affects people in different ways; a person with autism may also have other related characteristics, such as sensory sensitivity or a learning disability.

The National Autistic Society Cymru estimates that around 34,000 people in Wales are autistic, and that there around 136,000 people for whom autism is a part of their daily lives.

Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru

The [Autism Initiatives website](#) has information about Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru.

Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru is part of the Autism Initiatives group of charities. It provides a service for people with Autism Spectrum Conditions, their families and carers in Wales. It runs a One Stop Shop in Cardiff for people with autism at which adults with an autism spectrum condition can access a range of advice and support and take part in various social activities. The service is primarily delivered for people who have a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism who are over 16yrs of age.

The service is free and open to anyone with a diagnosis of autism who lives in Cardiff, Newport, Caerphilly, RCT, Merthyr Tydfil, Vale of Glamorgan, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Monmouthshire and Bridgend.

Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru states that it aims to work in real partnerships with people with an Autism Spectrum Condition, their families and other people important to them. It takes an individualist and person-centred approach, enabling people to do what is important to them and supports them to become successful people with autism.

Autism in Wales: a summary of the key Welsh Government policy and legislative initiatives

Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategic Action Plan

The [Autistic Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\) Strategic Action Plan](#) was launched by the Welsh Government in April 2008, the first of its kind in the UK. The plan introduced guidelines on autism for local agencies, including local authorities and Local Health Boards. The Welsh Government provided funding for local authorities to develop support focused on autism. This funding was initially ring-fenced, up until April 2015, after which it was transferred to local authorities' general budgets via the Revenue Support Grant.

Key actions set out in the action plan included:

- appointing an autism lead in each local authority;
- establishing a local stakeholder group that should include parents, carers and people with autism in each council area; and
- developing local autism action plans.

The Welsh Government published an [updated ASD Strategic Action Plan](#) on 30 November 2016. It has three key priority areas:

- Awareness raising, information and training;
- Assessment and diagnosis – including the introduction of a 26-week waiting time target from referral to first appointment for children with autism; and
- Meeting support needs – including efforts to improve support for children and young people in education through ‘Learning with Autism’ programmes.

The plan will be supported by a new [all-age National Integrated Autism Service](#), which is to be rolled out to all health boards across Wales by 2019. Specialist teams in each region will provide adult diagnosis, support in the community and advice and information for adults with autism, parents and carers and professionals.

The service was originally backed by [£6 million of Welsh Government investment over three years](#), but this was supplemented with an [extra £7 million over four years, announced in March 2017](#).

The funding is also intended to help develop improved autism resources, such as the “[Can you see me?](#)” scheme developed by the Welsh Local Government Association. This initiative is intended to promote understanding and acceptance of autism within communities in Wales, through the production of leaflets and posters for shops, banks, and other businesses, as well as for dentists and GPs. It will also be offering people with autism the choice of wearing a wristband or showing a card as a way of letting others know that they have autism.

In addition to the new integrated autism service the Welsh Government has announced improvements to neurodevelopmental diagnosis and support for children through the [Together for Children and Young People](#) (T4CYP) improvement programme with £2m annual funding.

The Strategic Action Plan is underpinned by an [Autistic Spectrum Disorder Delivery Plan 2016–2020](#) which details actions to be taken and the arrangements for monitoring and measuring them.

Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

The [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#) came into force for most purposes in April 2016. The Act provides a new framework for the provision of social services for children and adults in Wales, and sets out the duties on local authorities in relation to adults who need care and support, looked after children, care leavers, and accommodated children, including children with autism.

The Welsh Government views the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 as providing both [the framework and some of the tools](#) for developing autism services. These include:

- the requirement in the Act on local authorities to provide information, advice and assistance services;
- the creation of Regional Partnership Boards to ensure health boards, local authorities and the third sector work together;
- the power for Welsh Ministers to issue codes (including on autism) on the exercise of social services functions;
- the duty on local authorities and health boards to assess the care and support needs of their populations and identify preventative services to meet them, including services for people with autism;
- the requirement on local authorities to draw up voluntary registers of disabled children and, if they wish, disabled adults.

- provisions in the Act for transition from children's to adults' services.

Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Bill

The [Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal \(Wales\) Bill](#) was introduced by the Welsh Government on 12 December 2016, and is currently at Stage 2 of its scrutiny by the Assembly. This Bill seeks to reform the arrangements for meeting the needs of children and young people with additional learning needs, including autism.

There are currently separate arrangements and legislation for Special Educational Needs (SEN) up to age 16 and Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LDD) post-16. The Bill would replace these with a single legislative framework for all children and young people up to the age of 25 identified as having Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Further information about the Bill can be found in a [Research Service publication](#).

The Autism (Wales) Bill

Paul Davies AM won the Members' Bill Ballot on 28 March 2017, and is seeking to introduce a Bill entitled the [Autism \(Wales\) Bill](#).

The main policy objective of the Autism (Wales) Bill is "to make provision for meeting the needs of children and adults with autism spectrum conditions in Wales with the aim of protecting and promoting the rights of autistic children and adults in Wales". In addition, the Bill would "give autism its own statutory identity, recognising that autism is a condition in its own right".

The Explanatory Memorandum to the proposed Bill states that it seeks to supplement, not replace, the measures introduced by the WG in recent years, and to complement the provisions in the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Bill.

The proposed Bill has been [welcomed by The National Autistic Society](#).

A Leave to Proceed Debate took place on Wednesday 14 June 2017 at which the Assembly agreed that the Bill should proceed. Paul Davies AM therefore now has 13 months in which to introduce the Bill.