

Introduction

The Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) is the professional association and trade union for the 3,200 Educational Psychologists across the UK. In Wales the AEP has around 200 members.

The AEP seeks to promote the overall wellbeing of children and young people as well as to ensure that their specific special educational and mental health needs are met. This briefing is designed to share the expertise and insight of our members as part of the consultation on the proposed Autism (Wales) Bill.

Executive summary

The educational psychology (EP) profession is a highly skilled and essential element in the nation's workforce, expert in responding to the SEND and mental health issues of children and young people (CYP) and supporting their emotional well-being.

EPs work to provide support to pupils with special educational needs across multiple levels in both mainstream and alternative provision (AP). In Wales EPs have duties to contribute to statements of SEN in Wales.

EPs are trained in a holistic approach to support and help schools, families, and all children and young people within their communities, up to the age of 25.

Examples of support that EPs provide include:

- Working at the level of the individual child, groups of children, the whole class, and the year-group;
- Whole school-based interventions;
- Advice to senior staff in education settings at pre-school, school and college;
- Direct work (training and/or consultation) with parents and carers in their responses to their children;
- Supporting other childcare professionals through training, advice and

consultation.

The AEP would like to make the following key points in response to this consultation:

- The AEP recognises the difficulties faced by individuals with autism, and the problems that arise when they cannot access services.
- Our members are concerned about a postcode lottery of support, long delays in diagnosis and, importantly, in accessing follow-up services post-diagnosis.
- However, the AEP believes that it is vital to recognise potential pitfalls of singling out one group of people with different needs.
- The AEP supports an inclusive, joined-up, needs-based system which is not built solely on the diagnostic process.
- The AEP is concerned that new legislation on autism alone could undermine the new additional learning needs (ALN) reforms in Wales.
- Any new legislation must focus on co-ordination and co-operation, better training on understanding autism and other needs, and effective information-sharing.
- However, EPs and other professionals are facing significant workload pressures, reducing their ability to provide wider support.
- We urgently need a well-funded, upskilled workforce who can support individuals whatever their needs. Further legislation must be matched by increased funding in order to deliver this.

Please see below for further comments on the questions set out in the consultation.

The need for an ongoing autism strategy

- The effectiveness of the current arrangements for improving autism services in Wales is inconsistent.
- Many services are not operating in a joined-up manner, and long delays in diagnosis are a significant cause for concern.

- Better training for school staff on autism and the difficulties that CYP with autism face would help to combat these inconsistencies reported. EPs are well-placed to provide this.
- Opinion varied amongst our members as to whether there should be legislation requiring the Welsh Government to publish a national autism strategy for children and adults and issue guidance to local authorities and NHS bodies on implementing the strategy.
- Any legislation and guidance must be flexible enough to accommodate changes and advancements in, for example, diagnostic criteria. It is also important that it would comply with legislative reforms, and the ALN Code of Practice.
- The AEP recommends requiring the Welsh Government to undertake consultation with a wide range of groups when developing, reviewing and updating a national autism strategy. This should include parents, CYP and adults with autism, and relevant professionals, including EPs.

Clarity on pathways to diagnosis

- Despite the newly established Neuro-Developmental Services in each Health Board, long waiting lists have remained consistent. Delays in diagnosis and the post-diagnosis process should be addressed as a priority.
- The diagnostic process should be multi-disciplinary, not only involving medical professionals. It is crucial that EPs are involved closely in this process, in order to help to advise parents, schools and local authorities when planning appropriate educational provision.
- For the multi-disciplinary diagnostic process to be effective and timely there is an urgent need for enough specialist professionals, including educational psychologists, to be available to support the process.
- Provision to support the inclusion of children with autism or emerging diagnoses in pre-school settings is essential.
- The AEP supports proposals for Local Health Boards and Local Authorities in Wales to be required to publish information on the pathway to diagnosis for children and adults living in their areas.

Delivery of services

- Our members report that there is a postcode lottery when it comes to services currently provided to meet the needs of people with autism spectrum conditions in Wales.
- It is vital that support is also provided for those who do not have a specific diagnosis of autism but who demonstrate a similar profile of behaviour to those CYP who have autism.
- There are concerns about the sufficiency of provision in schools, as well as the provision of appropriate out-of-school activities that CYP with autism can join in.
- Statutory guidance and data collection practices must be linked back to wider ALN reforms, and children who do not meet diagnostic criteria but still demonstrate a similar profile of behaviour to those CYP who have autism must also be supported.

Training

- AEP members report that delays in diagnoses are linked to a lack of training on Autism Diagnostic Observation Scheduled (ADOS) assessments.
- Diagnosis should be multi-disciplinary, and it is crucial that EPs are involved closely in this process.
- The AEP recommends that EPs should be trained to carry out ADOS assessments and make diagnoses when supported by other professionals, such as Speech or Occupational Therapists.
- More broadly, members highlight that there is a significant amount of effective training currently being supported. It is important to understand what this is and how best to build on it, rather than developing something entirely new.

Employment

- The AEP recommends the provision of transitional mentor support to improve the rates of employment of people with autism.

- AEP members also suggest a community outreach system to provide support for access to work. This should come before entering the work place, and for a period of up to 3 months.

Definition of autism

- The AEP does not believe that a definition of an autistic spectrum disorder should be included on the face of the legislation. This would contradict the spirit of the new ALN legislation.
- To single out a definition in any legislation would be very difficult, and could exclude people who show signs of autism but do not fully meet the criteria.
- We share the views of our members on the importance of addressing types of need, rather than focusing on a rigid definition.
- It should be noted that there is already more than one diagnostic manual for autism, each stating different definitions.

Unintended consequences

- The AEP recognises that receiving a diagnosis of autism provides many individuals and their families with a measure of certainty, greater insight into the difficulties they experience, and access to services.
- However, it is very important to consider that this is not the experience of all individuals and their families, who may not wish to pursue a diagnosis of autism.
- In addition, there is a risk that individuals who do not receive a diagnosis but still show signs of autism, do not receive the same level of support, leading to unequal treatment.
- It is essential that support is based on need, and not a diagnosis alone. If the latter is the case, the AEP is concerned that there could be a rise in the number of individuals and families exploring a diagnosis to receive support, leading to more challenges when that support is not forthcoming.
- The AEP is concerned that an increased demand for diagnosis, if met with a failure to increase resources, will result in poor assessments and more false positives.

Costs

- When developing and implementing a national autism strategy the AEP anticipates extra costs, particularly for: additional duties for local authorities and NHS bodies; improving the timeliness of the diagnostic process; providing support for families; the training of staff.

Savings

- Overall, we would anticipate that improving the way in which mental health needs are met, not just meeting the needs of those diagnoses with autism, would represent a significant saving.
- Long term benefits and savings could include: reduced absences from work, reducing offending; increasing employment rates.