

## **SUBMISSION FROM JACKIE RAVET, MEG TAYLOR AND MHAIRI BEATON**

1. We agree that there is an urgent need for a national autism strategy. Current provision creates exclusion because it is failing to meet the needs of thousands of people on the autism spectrum. A national autism strategy is therefore an ethical necessity. It is required, at a practical level, to address the gross disadvantage currently experienced by this vulnerable group. Planned provision, coordinated support and early intervention will also save millions of pounds on crisis intervention and therefore makes good economic sense.
2. However, we wish to make the following points—
3. Guidance for this strategy must focus on the seven key areas specified in the Bill: identification, diagnosis, assessment, transitions, provision, training and leadership. However, the focus on training is absolutely pivotal since this underpins planning in each of the other areas. A decade of research repeatedly indicates that poor autism awareness is a key barrier to the development of appropriate and effective provision for individuals on the autism spectrum, and to the development of autism friendly workplaces, interprofessionalism and service integration. Conversely, where there is adequate training there is good practice in autism and enhanced service provision. Everything therefore hinges on autism training that is well planned, progressive and effectively monitored, and sits within a national autism training framework.
4. Having said this, it is important that the impact of training and service provision is regularly evaluated. Training alone cannot improve services since there are widespread barriers to implementation that prevent training from being effective eg lack of time, funding, and leadership, negative staff attitudes etc. In order to be effective, autism guidance must require service managers to address these barriers so that real change is possible. A requirement for service evaluation should therefore be made under the Bill to ensure that there is evidence that new initiatives are actually making a difference.
5. Legislation is required to support the national autism strategy since years of inclusion legislation, plus the raft of other legislation listed in the Policy Memorandum, have not brought about a significant improvement in the quality of provision for this vulnerable group. This is highly regrettable but should give pause for reflection. Why is this? What has gone wrong? Unfortunately, the result has been unacceptably high levels of exclusion across Scottish services (e.g. 1:5 children on the autism spectrum excluded from Scottish school). These high rates link back to the problem of training and to a lack of understanding of the unique needs of this particular group amongst planners, service managers and practitioners. This underscores the need for training at all levels, especially amongst planners and managers auditing and evaluating service provision.

6. Legislation is also required because the autism strategy must have “teeth” and establish imperatives that ensure action for change. If the guidance is optional, the national strategy may well dissolve into a box-ticking exercise that brings no real benefits to individuals on the autism spectrum.
7. However, it is important to state that legislation must not bring undue advantage to people on the autism spectrum over other groups. Its purpose must be to re-dress the current unfair and unethical imbalance. This should be made explicit in the Bill.
8. It is well established in the research that an interprofessional approach is vital to the effective coordination and delivery of autism services. Though strides have been made in this area, joined up working is still not well embedded across Scottish services. It would be beneficial if the emphasis on interprofessionalism were strengthened in the Bill.
9. Finally, it is absolutely vital that a national autism strategy is fully funded by the Scottish Government – especially in the current financial crisis. Cash strapped local authorities will need financial support to cover any additional costs. These matters should be clarified in the Bill.

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