

SUBMISSION FROM DAVID NICHOLSON

1. I write to you to give written evidence in relation to the Autism (Scotland) Bill which is currently being considered by the Scottish Parliament Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. As a university student with Aspergers Syndrome, I'm pleased to have this opportunity to give my thoughts on the Bill and its contents.
2. I want to use this opportunity to focus my evidence on two key aspects of the Bill. The first aspect is the creation of a national autism strategy for Scotland. At the present time Scotland does not have a strategy in place. The result of no strategy is that Scotland has a postcode lottery in terms of the support and services it provides for people with autism. This means that the amount of support and services available depends on what area you live in Scotland. This means that for people with autism living in the Borders area of Scotland, they may get less support than those living up in the Highlands. The question is this: is this acceptable in a 21st century country? The answer is that it is most certainly not okay for Scotland to have a postcode lottery of support and services. This is why we need a strategy which would force all 32 local authorities to make up strategies in their areas which would provide good, consistent support for people living with autism in their area. This is what is needed and required if people with autism in Scotland want to live full and successful lives and to contribute positively to Scottish society. On a personal note I was educated in two different areas of Scotland. I spent my last year of secondary education up in the Highlands and found the support they offered there to be very different to the support I received in my home local authority. Both local authorities provided good support but I sincerely feel, after reflecting upon my own experiences, that all local authorities must provide the same support. Otherwise it just creates inequality which certainly is not fair.
3. I also want to make clear my feelings on the strategy being backed by legislation. This is vitally important so that local authorities can be made accountable to Scottish Ministers over their actions with regards to autism strategies in their local authority areas. I'm afraid to say that any national autism strategy that did not have legislative force behind it would, I feel, not be sufficient enough to really force local authorities to come up with ways to improve support and services for those people affected by autism. If any national strategy for autism is to succeed it is vitally important it has legislative backing. Otherwise there is every chance that local authorities will continue to put autism lower down their agendas and therefore nothing gets done. The Scottish Government has put forward a consultation on an autism strategy and this move has to be commended as a positive step although I do not think that the Scottish Government realise that if their plans were to succeed and to succeed well, then their idea for a strategy would need legislative force.
4. Under Section 1 of the proposed Bill, it is noted that Scottish Ministers must consult with relevant stakeholders when preparing the autism

strategy. This is vitally important and Scottish Ministers must ensure that people on the autistic spectrum are fully engaged in this process from the start. People who are going to be affected by the legislation have the right to be involved in the process to make sure that the strategy is fit for purpose.

5. The second point I want to focus on, is Section two of the Autism (Scotland) Bill. This concerns guidance issued by Scottish Ministers in relation to the strategy.
6. Under Section 2(2), it states that guidance must be issued no later than 12 months after the day in which the Act comes into force. I would argue that 12 months is rather a long time and that perhaps six months would be far better and therefore means things get done quicker. We are in a situation where the situation surrounding autism is in urgent need of reform and I feel guidance must be issued at the very least six months after the Act has come into force. I acknowledge that other people may have their own views on this which may be different to mine but I thought it important to bring it to your attention so you may consider it.
7. Under Section 2(5), the Bill lays out, quite clearly in my view, the guidance which should be given in terms of specific issues such as the identification of persons with such conditions (that means people with autism). This is commendable and I hope that most other people see that this subsection is the main strength of the Bill. I would however, make it known that guidance on transition from childhood to adulthood for people with autism has to be very clear and comprehensive. It has to acknowledge the fact that transition between childhood and adulthood is different for every individual with autism because autism affects each individual differently. My experiences of transition from childhood to adulthood will be different to other people. This is what makes autism a complex and difficult condition to understand. My transition for example was positive in that I did get formally diagnosed with having Aspergers Syndrome just before I left high school for university and therefore I was able to access the appropriate support I needed when I arrived at university. Other people on the autistic spectrum may not be so lucky and therefore may struggle very badly indeed when they move from childhood to adulthood.
8. In conclusion, I am delighted to be given this evidence to you and which I hope is useful to you as your committee considers the Bill. I want to take this opportunity now as I conclude to say that the Scottish Parliament has an enormous opportunity to bring about change that will go a long way in helping my peers and I achieve success and to fulfill our potential in life. My peers and I have talent to succeed in fields such as science, education, law and politics but it's the politicians at the Scottish Parliament that my peers and I look up to to deliver change, change that will make a difference, a real and radical difference and give my peers and I hope, hope for a bright and successful future. The Scottish Parliament has done good things before, it now has the

opportunity to make more positive and radical change to the Autism Community. My peers and I, hope and pray that the parliament can deliver.

9. Thank you for taking the time to read my evidence. I hope you found it of use.

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