

JAM/AJ/124/11/08

17 November 2008

Ms Hannah Cavalleros
Learning Disability Unit
Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety
Room D1, Castle Buildings
Upper Newtownards Road
BELFAST BT4 3SQ

Dear Madam

At a recent meeting the Council discussed the Consultation Document 'Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Strategic Action Plan 2008/09 – 2010/11'.

The Members noted that the Action Plan was broadly based on the recommendations of the Bamford Report. I would emphasise that this Council did not accept the findings of the Bamford Report as it (the Council) was of the view that it was fundamentally flawed.

Notwithstanding the above, this Council would like to make the following points in relation to the Consultation Document:

- 1 There does not appear to be adequate resources for the Health Visitor's Home Visits programme and the increased number of referrals for screening.
- 2 The removal of the IQ tests as a gateway for services for children with Asperger's Syndrome was long overdue and welcomed, but again the resourcing of this initiative does not appear to be adequate, given the increased demand on services.
- 3 The dedicated budget for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) of £2.2 million was allocated over three years and again would appear to be inadequate given that the Independent Review recommended a budget of £1.75 million in year 1, rising in increments over ten years.
- 4 The £2.2 million mentioned above has been taken out of the £17 million allocation for Learning Disabilities and consequently is thus not new money.
- 5 The Action Plan was very medical and public health orientated without the awareness of the need beyond assessment and diagnostic services. It is social care and education that are of most importance. There is no reference to the need for training for those in leisure, recreation and other social contacts with these children (i.e. training for services availed of by the child living with autism –opticians, etc). Often the report refers to the need for support, but there is little specific family support services which were recommended in the Independent Review.
- 6 Neither parents nor a representative ASD voluntary agency were included in the membership of the Independent Review upon which the Action Plan was based. The Bamford Review did not include membership from a representative ASD voluntary agency or any of its Committees either. This is surely a contradiction of the plan's vision of a person's centred focus.

- 7 The prevalence rates quoted in the action plan are out of date. This has the effect of understating the need and the size of the challenge. It only refers to the 200 children born each year with ASD. However no mention is made of the 4,000 school children already diagnosed and requiring a service. Again there is no baseline or benchmarking of these statistics. In the UK the prevalence rate is 1:100 which in effect means that 1% of the population is affected with ASD.
- 8 The Plan is not a strategic document in that, while it refers to Education and the Voluntary Sector, it fails to set out a mechanism to assist real partnership. It only tweaks the existing system in an effort to make it function better by focusing on specific targets and providing some funding for them. It is a perfect example of a failure of joined up Government, especially when one considers that the Education Department is about to commence their own ASD Action Plan.
- 9 The targets are tight and time-bound with little funding to help achieve them.
- 10 The Plan fails to put forward any examples of Best Practice.

Yours faithfully

John A McLaughlin
Chief Executive