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Assembly pledge to tackle autism



More children are being diagnosed with autism

The Northern Ireland Assembly has backed a major review into services for those suffering from a rare form of autism.

The charity, Parents and Professionals Autism (PAPA), had been urging effective cross-departmental co-operation to address increasing rates of the condition, known as Asperger's Syndrome.

Assembly members debated a motion on the issue on Tuesday.

PAPA Director Arlene Cassidy said: "This second motion in five months on autistic spectrum disorder signifies the growing concern felt by many MLAs, partly due to pressure from their constituents, about autism in Northern Ireland.

"The motion recognises that co-ordination of the Stormont departments is crucial to tackling the alarming rise in numbers of local people with autism.

"Recent reports have indicated that autism is now five times more common than Down's Syndrome."

'New resources'

Ms Cassidy said people in Northern Ireland with Asperger's Syndrome were currently "being passed like a hot potato between learning disability and mental health care programmes".

"This is due to a lack of training about the condition and a serious lack of resources to tackle this 'new' disability," she said.

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To ensure inter-departmental autism collaboration and an effective regional training strategy, PAPA is calling on the assembly to endorse the motion and commit new resources to addressing the rise of autism locally

**Arlene Cassidy
PAPA**

The group said the Department of Education had the courage to put the future of Northern Ireland's children above cost-saving exercises when it published its task group report on autism in May.

The motion on Asperger's Syndrome has been tabled by the SDLP's John Fee.

"Quite often we have highly skilled professionals who have to make personal choices about the type of support procedures or treatments that the individual should have," he said.



John Fee: Tabling motion

"There doesn't appear to be accurate information about the numbers of people who have the disorder."

Health Minister Bairbre de Brun said she was committed to ensuring sufferers had access to services.

"Improving professional awareness of the condition is resulting in earlier diagnosis which can now be detected in early years children," she said.

A total of 400 children and 114 adults have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome with a further 159 children awaiting diagnosis, she said.

'Limited capacity'

Education Minister Martin McGuinness said he would do all he could to secure the necessary resources to develop services for special needs children.

"My department is taking forward work in relation to educational provision for children with Asperger's Syndrome in a variety of ways," he said.

Autism is a developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and interacts with other people.

People with autism cannot relate to others in a meaningful way. They also have trouble making sense of the world at large.

As a result, their ability to develop friendships can be impaired. They can also have a limited capacity to understand other people's feelings.

Autism is often also associated with learning disabilities.