



ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER EDWIN POOTS – TUESDAY 14 JANUARY 2014 – CROSS DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGY ON AUTISM

I wish to make the following statement to the Assembly to formally launch the Autism Strategy (2013 – 2020) and accompanying Action Plan (2013 – 2016).

The All Party Group on Autism brought forward the Autism Bill, supported by parents and carers under the umbrella of Autism NI, which this House passed on 15 March 2011.

The development of the Autism Strategy, which was led by my department, as required by the Autism Act (NI) 2011, is the first of its kind in terms of a cross-departmental Strategy addressing the 'whole life' needs of people, families and carers living with autism in Northern Ireland.

As well as leading on the development, the Act requires my department to lead on the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the Autism Strategy with other departments obliged to co-operate.

That work began in autumn 2011 and has culminated in the Autism Strategy and Action Plan which I, and my Executive colleagues, approved for publication on the 28 November 2013.

The successful development of the Strategy and Action Plan can be attributed to the effective work of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary Project Board, coupled with the proactive input of the autism community throughout Northern Ireland.

From the very earliest stages of development, the Autism Strategy Project Board engaged with, and ensured the involvement of - people, families and carers living with autism - as well as representatives from all government departments, health and social care organisations and the community and voluntary sector.

To inform the content of the Strategy, a number of pre-consultation events were held across Northern Ireland in which people were encouraged to highlight individual and or local community issues about services, or gaps in provision for families living with autism.

I would like to recognise and commend the effective role which the voluntary sector played in facilitating these events.

Most importantly, we engaged with children, young people and adults with autism, as well as parents and carers, and this engagement was repeated when the draft Autism Strategy and Action Plan were issued for formal consultation.

The public consultation engagement events were well attended and these, along with questionnaire responses and submissions from a range of organisations, offered the opportunity for those closest to autism to comment on the draft document.

Departments worked to address as many of the issues highlighted in the public consultation feedback and responses as possible, to produce the final version of the Strategy which is being published today.

The Autism Strategy (2013 – 2020) and Action Plan (2013 – 2016), outline the Executive's commitment to improving services and support for people with autism and their families, throughout their lives. These documents represent a major step in fulfilling the requirements of the Autism Act of 2011.

The *prevalence of autism* is a key element outlined within the Strategy and the document includes an assessment of the current position on data prevalence using data already held. New arrangements

are being introduced in HSC Trusts to monitor, record and collate autism specific data in respect of both children and adults living in Northern Ireland. A Prevalence of Autism subgroup is in place to take this forward.

The Strategy presents a high level overview of the range of services and support currently available to people with autism and their families across a range of sectors and departments. This will provide a baseline starting point for Departments when evaluating the Strategy in future.

Along the way to where we are today, I wish to recognise the substantial work that has been carried out within Health and Social Care following the Independent Review of Autism Services in 2008. This has included the launch of the Regional Autism Disorder Network (RASDN) in 2009, chaired by Dr Stephen Bergin. RASDN achievements include:

- the development of specialist children's autism services in every HSC Trust and improved waiting times for diagnosis / initial assessment of children;
- the establishment of a Regional ASD Coordinator post, with ASD Coordinators and cross-agency operational groups in each HSC Trust.
- the development and launch of *The Six Steps of Autism Care for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland* and *Autism: A Guide for Families* in October 2011; and
- *Autism Adult Care Pathway* in June 2012

These autism care pathways provide the basis upon which departments can build and enhance a 'joined-up' approach to autism service delivery.

This Strategy sets out eleven key themes which are aligned to strategic priorities. These have been developed in accordance with articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and also form the basis of the Action Plan.

The themes are - **Awareness; Accessibility; Children, Young People and Family; Health and Wellbeing; Education; Transitions; Employability; Independence, Choice and Control; Access to Justice; Being Part of the Community; and Participation and Active Citizenship.**

Some of the key deliverables from the Strategy and Action Plan include:

- An autism awareness campaign comprising a comprehensive training awareness programme for government frontline staff and proposals for a wider public awareness campaign;
- Planned improvements in accessibility to goods and services - for example, access to communication and information; and to travel and transport services which better meet the needs of people with autism;
- Support for families living with autism including more access to information about support and services available within local communities;
- The establishment of a **Multi-Agency Autism Advice Service pilot** in the Northern HSC Trust - this will be a signposting and referral service which, I am happy to tell you, is being launched in Ballymena this afternoon;
- Within Health and Social Care we will concentrate our efforts on developing our adult autism services in parallel with reviewing and, where necessary, reconfiguring children's autism services to meet increased demand;
- Within Education, the actions attributed to education sector bodies will assist in meeting the strategic priority of ensuring that children and young people with autism receive a high quality education, that prepares them for life and work and enables them to fulfil their potential;
- Within Justice - a new Autism Guide for Criminal Justice professionals will be developed.

An overview of the **Implementation Approach and Structures** is outlined within the Strategy. A new **Autism Strategy Regional Multi-Agency Implementation Team** is to be established and will co-ordinate and manage the implementation of the Strategy on a cross-departmental basis. This group will be chaired by the new **Regional Autism Coordinator**, when appointed.

This is a post originally funded by my Department within the Health and Social Care Board in 2009 to lead and manage the service improvement and regional co-ordination of health and social care autism services. Still within the HSC Board, their role is now broadened to include the additional responsibility of leading the Implementation Team to progress the Strategy and Action plan. The new post is being advertised this month.

The Regional Implementation Team will be supported at local and community level by sub groups. They include: *five Local Autism Fora*; the *Prevalence of Autism sub group*; and the *NI Autism Strategy Research Advisory Committee*.

It is planned that the *Local Autism Fora* will evolve from the reconfiguration of the established Regional ASD Networks (RASDN), which historically were led by Health and Social Care. They will be strengthened to include relevant representation from all the key sectors. So, effectively, they will be the operational hubs responsible for implementing the Strategy locally.

It is vital that we retain the voice of people with autism, their families and carers on operational issues. The establishment of five *Local Autism Reference Groups*, which will work in tandem with the Local Autism Fora should assist in achieving that aim.

A *Prevalence of Autism sub-group* has responsibility for overseeing the requirement in the Autism Act for all HSC Trusts to provide data on the prevalence of autism, and they will continue to do so throughout the lifetime of the Strategy. This group is chaired by my Department.

In April 2012, I requested the establishment of a specific **Research Advisory Committee** to assist Departments, as required, with research findings and best practice on Autism, relevant to the needs of their policy areas. I invited Dr Arlene Cassidy, Autism NI Chief Executive, to chair this Committee.

In November 2013, in addition to approving the Autism Strategy and Action Plan, I asked my Executive colleagues to commit their Departments to co-operate with the Regional Autism Coordinator, in the implementation of the Strategy. I am encouraged that Executive colleagues have committed to the implementation approach and the monitoring and reporting structures and roles, at both strategic and operational levels, which will help deliver the 'joined up' approach to autism services that *The Autism Strategy* sets out to achieve.

The Regional Coordinator will report to the Interdepartmental Senior Officials Group, who in turn will report to me. As required by the Autism Act (NI) 2011, I will lay a monitoring report on the implementation of the Strategy before the Assembly at least every three years.

I know that you will all agree and acknowledge that the changes envisaged in the Autism Strategy and initial Action Plan can only be achieved through the continuing commitment of government departments and other statutory bodies, working alongside people, families and carers living with autism, and in co-operation with the community and voluntary sector.

Within my Department, additional resources of £1.64m recurrent from 2008/09 has been provided primarily for children's autism specialist services teams with Health and Social Care Trusts. Further investment of £250k in 2013/14 from the Health and Social Care Board has been invested to commence development of adult autism services.

Whilst it has not been possible to secure significant new or additional resources or investment in respect of the Strategy and Action Plan, government departments and agencies are committed to making more effective use of available resources.

I would like to advise the Assembly that my Department has submitted a proposal to the NI Executive Advertising Programme for 2014/15 to secure approval for funding to be set aside for a government advertising campaign with the aim of raising public awareness about autism. If approved, I will seek to have funding earmarked and provided for from within my Department's 2014/15 allocation. Providing the proposal is approved and the funding is secured, this will deliver an important element of an autism awareness campaign, as prescribed within the legislation.

I want to thank my Ministerial colleagues for their cooperation to date, and the support which their officials continually provided to my Department throughout the development of the Autism Strategy.

Conclusion

Looking forward, my Executive colleagues and I remain committed to commissioning, developing and delivering services so we can collectively maximise the potential, participation and inclusion of people with autism throughout their lives; and at the same time provide support and encouragement to them and their families.

I have earlier acknowledged the vital role of the community and voluntary sector in the development of the Autism Strategy and their continued collaborative input will be a key part of its implementation too. By their nature, voluntary organisations constantly compete with each other to attract support (of members or participants), to generate income, to raise their public profile and to deliver a range of services and support (augmenting that which the statutory sector provides) to their target populations.

Autism is no exception, and there are a number of local organisations, or branches of national bodies, working with, and for, the autism community here.

As we move into the future, I very much hope that their energies and priorities are channelled even more toward cooperation and improving the lives of people with autism, and their families and carers – as the development of this strategy has shown, working together in tandem with the statutory sector, we can achieve so much more.

Thank you