

**PE1837/J**

Petitioner submission of 19 January 2021

Due to the complexity of the issue, I am keen to provide oral evidence to the committee at the earliest opportunity. It is clear from the submissions that there is a lack of support for autistic people.

The Cross Party Working Group for autism (supported by the National Autistic Society (NAS) and Scottish Autism) published 'The Accountability Gap', highlighting the autism strategy has failed. Their report found that: 72% do not have enough support, and 78% saying they can't access support locally. It also highlighted a lack of accountability at a local level. Why is there an accountability gap when there are statutory supports available such as the Children's Act s.23&24, Social Work (Adults) s.12 and Mental Health Act s.25?

The Scottish Government state they established the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) to "*support Health and Social Care Partnerships to consider best practice*". I asked NAIT if autism was a mental disorder, they said "*Autism is not a mental disorder. Although Autism is diagnosed through the DSM – statistical manual of mental disorders, it is clearly described as a neurodevelopmental disorder, and not a mental disorder*".

Yet, when I sent a freedom of information request (FOIR) to the Scottish Government asking if autism is a mental disorder they said "*As autism is in the DSM, autism is indeed included under MHA s.328(1)*" – yet, within the same reply they said "*autism on its own, does not qualify as a mental disorder under the 2003 Act*". Why is this an issue? How does this relate to 'The Accountability Gap Report' and why does having a diagnosis of autism prevent autistic people accessing support?

The following narrative happens across Scotland ... people think autism is a mental disorder and will refer to mental health services, but mental health services usually decline to support solely autistic needs, they reject or re-refer to social work. Social work will generally decline to support because they claim autism is a mental disorder. This is why autistic people without a learning disability (LD) or mental health issue can't access support. This is at the root of the problem in Scotland. Until we have direction from the Scottish Government, there will always be an accountability gap ... even an autistic commissioner wouldn't help until this is resolved. People wait for years to be diagnosed, only to find no support once diagnosed.

The Scottish Government state it is Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCP's) who determine autistic support. Often the only way an autistic person will be able to access support will come down to a professional's decision on whether or not they think autism is a mental disorder. This is why there are some examples of social work supporting autistic people, but other areas are not.

Autism Network Scotland (ANS) are funded by the Scottish Government to be the host organisation for the strategy. The idea is for all local autism leads of HSCP's to come together to feedback to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government have not mentioned any of this in their submission? Local autism leads have

continued to raise concerns to ANS that the Scottish Government are not consulting this network.

The previous Director of ANS, and ANS as an organisation, have both made submissions supporting this petition. How can the Scottish Government claim that autistic people are being supported when the host organisation claim otherwise? I would ask the committee to engage with ANS to give an overview of what is happening in Scotland.

The Scottish Government are not listening to concerns. This is evident in the proposed 'Learning/Intellectual Disability and Autism Recovery Plan. The Scottish Government have said this plan will align the closure of the autism strategy with the LD plan in 2023. This is alarming the autistic community as they have long been in the shadow of learning disability. For example, the Milan Report for the Mental Health Act recommended autism be covered in the Act under an LD definition.

The Scottish Government claim the issues faced by autistic people and LD population are very similar, hence the joint plan, yet the challenges are not the same. I sent a FOIR to the Scottish Government about the joint plan, yet they can't provide any information as to who made the decision to join LD and autism together. ANS claim they haven't been consulted either?

The worry from the autistic community is that this transition plan is just the start of a super LD policy to follow in 2023. The autistic population will have major difficulty highlighting their challenges if their narrative is shared with LD. As one autistic person's submission explains "I have above average IQ as with 70% of my autistic peers. Why are we labelled incorrectly and stereotyped as such?".

If the Scottish Government had engaged with ANS network they would have been told this is not the way to conclude the autism strategy, ... that the reason there is an accountability gap is because autism has always had to co-exist with other dispositions such as LD & mental health and until there is clarity from the Scottish Government, there will always be an accountability gap for autistic people.