



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **Improving Autism Services**

DATE **18 February 2019**

BY **Vaughan Gething AM, Minister for Health and Social Services**

The National Assembly's scrutiny of the Autism (Wales) Bill provided a welcome and valuable opportunity to consider whether autism-specific legislation would add value to the current autism services available in Wales.

I recognise there will be many people who will be disappointed this Bill is not proceeding further. However, over the course of the last year, it has highlighted the everyday experiences of people with autism and their families and carers of their interaction with services in Wales – both good and bad.

As the National Assembly committees, which examined the legislation, acknowledged, the Welsh Government is reforming services. This improvement programme needs to be accelerated and the remaining gaps in provision need to be addressed.

I have been clear that although the Welsh Government does not support legislation at this time – we agree with the need to speed up the pace of improvement.

Many clinicians and professional organisations – including the Royal College of Psychiatrists; the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Occupational Therapists; the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Welsh NHS Confederation – support the need to allow these reforms to become embedded and reviewed before considering new legislation.

We have all the laws and powers we need to drive reform – in the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and the NHS (Wales) Act 2006; in the Future Generations Act 2015 and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.

Our programme of reform includes the roll out of the national integrated autism service, which will be available in every region of Wales by April 2019. To make sure this service is addressing identified gaps in provision, an independent evaluation will be completed in the coming weeks and the preliminary findings will be available in February.

I have also commissioned a review of the barriers to reducing diagnostic waiting times and on how wider neurodevelopmental services can be aligned to address any emerging gaps in services for people with other or co-existing conditions. This will be completed by the end of March 2019.

To strengthen and underpin existing duties, we are consulting on proposals for a statutory Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism Services under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and NHS (Wales) Act 2006.

The code will be delivered this year and will set out how local authorities and the NHS should adapt their services to meet autistic people's needs. Public engagement events have been organised in Llandrindod Wells, Swansea, Llandudno and Cardiff during February 2019 and the consultation is open until 1 March.

This code will have as much or greater force and remedies than the proposed Autism (Wales) Bill. In addition to existing local complaints procedures, the Welsh Government can directly intervene in both health and local authority services where services are found to be failing. The clear services standards the code will set out provide the context within which these powers can be used in the future.

In other areas we have already taken such action to issue warning notices to a local authority when services have not met expected standards. There are similar powers to intervene in health services which we have also used.

I understand many parents concerns about the support their children receive at school and college. We are consulting separately on the Additional Learning Needs Code and proposed regulations to support the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. This consultation will end on 22 March.

The second annual report about the delivery of the ASD Strategic Action Plan, which will be published by June 2019, will provide an update about assessment waiting times; the development of referral pathways; updating housing management guidance; preparing for the roll out of the new additional learning needs system and improving data through the development of a GP autism register. It will also provide feedback on the delivery of the integrated autism service.

Our improvement work continues to be supported by the National Autism Team, which is hosted jointly by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Public Health Wales. The team plays a vital role in facilitating collaboration, supporting service delivery and raising awareness of autism, including providing tools and resources.

Visits to the ASDinfo.wales website, which the team maintains, have increased by 30,000 since 2017, to more than 108,000 in 2018. More than 30,000 people have completed the ASD Aware scheme – 8,000 of these during 2018. Almost 4,500 primary school teaching staff have completed the Learning with Autism programme and more than 26,500 children are now Autism 'super heroes'. To ensure this support continues uninterrupted, I have renewed staff funding for the National Autism Team until March 2022.

We have introduced a new 26-week waiting time standard for neurodevelopment assessments for children and young people, data will be published when it is available. This new standard will measure waiting times from referral to the first face-to-face appointment, rather than just signalling the start of assessment.

There will always be more to be done and the reforms we are putting in place need to be implemented with energy and pace. A national conference for autistic people, their parents and carers will be held on 3 April in Swansea aimed at improving wellbeing outcomes.

A further independent evaluation will be commissioned this year which will be based on the recommendations arising from the current evaluation and those made by Assembly Committees during the Autism (Wales) Bill's scrutiny. This additional work will provide us with the evidence we need to ensure our reforms are delivering for people with autism in Wales or whether we need to consider a change of course later in this Assembly term.