

6th January 2011

Dr Kathryn Bell
Clerk of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Room 410
Parliament Buildings
Stormont,
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Action for Children Northern Ireland
Loughshore House
10 Heron Road
Belfast BT3 9LE

Telephone: 028 90 460500

Fax: 028 90 459 169

www.actionforchildren.org.uk

Dear Kathryn

Autism Bill

I am writing to you in response to your letter to Dawn Shaw (10th December 2010) and the NI Assembly Autism Bill. In addition to some information about Action for Children, our response below includes some general points and suggestions (*in italics*) regarding the Bill and its Clauses.

Action for Children works with children and young people who most need support to achieve their full potential. This includes providing services for children and young people whose families need support, who cannot live with their birth families, who are disabled and who experience severe difficulties in their lives. Through our services and campaigns, we challenge injustice, deprivation and inequality, and seek to empower children to overcome the obstacles in their lives that hold them back.

Across the UK, Action for Children is a major provider of services to disabled children and we currently run over 60 projects providing specialist services for disabled children in partnership with local authorities and other providers in GB in addition to over 9,000 disabled children accessing our other inclusive children's services.

Our specialist disability services include domiciliary care, residential short breaks, residential care and schools, Children's Centres, transition support, key working, advocacy, shared care short breaks, and inclusive play and leisure activities. A significant number of children using our services have challenging behaviour, complex health needs or life-limiting illnesses.

While we do not currently provide any specialist disability services in Northern Ireland, we are interested in developing such services as part of our portfolio of services addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised children and young people. We work in close partnership with a number of disability organisations in helping support families of disabled children including children on the Autism Spectrum.

Action for Children believes there should be a legally enforceable duty placed on statutory / local authorities to ensure that services are responsive, flexible and of a high-quality and that each service must be provided to each disabled child, young person and their family based on a true assessment of need.

Action for Children supports the primary intention of the NI Assembly Autism Bill and its key Clauses focused on enhancing provision of services and support for people on the autism spectrum through a) amending the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in order to resolve any ambiguity as to whether the term “disability” applies to autism spectrum conditions and b) requiring the preparation and implementation of an autism strategy in Northern Ireland, led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) but with full cooperation of other government *departments and sectors*.

Amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

We note that Clause 1 seeks to amend the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (“the Act”), a UK piece of legislation, through amending the definition of disability in “the Act” to include reference to ‘social’ impairments which are to be interpreted as including communication difficulties. We note also that Clause 1 seeks to extend the definition of “normal day-to-day activities” in Schedule 1 so that a condition which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on someone’s ability to take part in normal social interaction or to form social relationships can constitute a “disability”.

Autism Strategy – Development, Implementation and Content

We note Clause 2 requires the DHSSPS (“the Department”) to prepare and publish a strategy on autism within 2 years of the passing of the Act and following consultation with the other Northern Ireland Executive departments - who are placed under an obligation to implement any part of the strategy for which they are responsible. *However, the strategy must be accompanied by statutory duties on local agencies such as Health and Social Care Trusts and Education bodies to deliver service improvements for people on the autism spectrum, and those with Aspergers syndrome in particular.*

Action for Children believes it is essential that Northern Ireland government departments and their agencies should be required to co-operate in the preparation, *implementation and review* of any such strategies with the Minister reporting to the Assembly every three years.

With regard to the content of the autism strategy, we note Clause 3 sets out how the needs of people with autism spectrum conditions are to be addressed throughout their lives. *We welcome this ‘lifetime’ and holistic focus and believe the autism strategy should pay particular attention to key ‘transition’ issues facing children and young people on the autism spectrum. In doing so, the strategy should consider the challenges many older young people may face when making the move toward adulthood and ‘independence’ and the need for ongoing support from adult services.*

We note too that the autism strategy must identify what steps the Department propose to take to promote an autism awareness campaign and also what training measures are to be taken with the Northern Ireland Civil Service staff who interface with the public on such issues.

I hope you find this submission of assistance to the Committee’s consideration of the Bill and need for any amendments to it.

Yours sincerely

Louise Warde Hunter
Strategic Director Children’s Services
Action for Children Northern Ireland and Scotland