

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am the Editor of the award winning Autism Eye magazine and I am also from Northern Ireland.

A good starting point for the Committee would be to ensure that the education of those with learning disabilities is extended to 25 years of age. I'm sure you are already aware that on 9th May 2012 the Queen's Speech extended the legal right to educational support up to the age of 25 for young disabled people. The Queen's Speech confirms that the British Government will create an education, health and care plan from birth to 25 years years –providing statutory protections comparable to those currently associated with the Statement of Special Education Needs. This reform has the potential to revolutionise the life chances of thousands of young people with autism for instance, many of whom are currently denied access to any educational opportunities beyond school.

I am acutely aware that in Northern Ireland families are literally crying out for comparable statutory protections, but the system is failing them. For instance there is very little autism specific provision in Northern Ireland and even where it does exist young people are being denied access to continuing education and training which they need to get jobs and live more independently. Take the special school Cedar Lodge in Belfast, for instance which has 60 per cent of its pupils on the autism spectrum and still only goes up to age of 16. I understand the head teacher is campaigning to extend that to 19, but will it happen?

The reality is that post school, three in four young people with autism currently end up at home with nothing to do or are in long-term costly residential care because of the lack of appropriate educational support beyond school. So what is the answer? To begin, Northern Ireland must give these young people a clear legal right to an education up to the age of 25 and enable them to access the education and training they need to live more independently.

Kind regards,

Gillian Loughran

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