

Peter MCCallion
Clerk to the Committee for Education
Room 375
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

Tel No: (028) 9127 9849
Fax No: (028) 9127 9100

Email: russell.welsh@deni.gov.uk

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Dear Peter

SEND BILL – AUTISM ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2011

I refer to your letter of 29 May 2015 regarding the Committee's consideration of the SEND Bill and to the impact of the Autism Act on the provision of SEN services for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The Committee has requested an update on how the Autism Act 2011 has improved provision and inter –agency working to the benefit of children with ASD.

Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Since the launch of the Autism Act in 2011 and the associated cross-Departmental Autism Strategy and Action Plan in January 2014, the Department of Education (DE) has worked closely with the Education Authority (EA) and the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) on the implementation of the education-specific actions to develop support and provision for children and young people with autism.

The EA and MCA continues to improve provision by building the capacity of schools to support the needs of children with autism through both their delivery of autism specific training and the capacity building work delivered as part of the specialist direct support offered to children with autism by the MCA. Training for teachers and educational professionals to ensure ongoing effective support for pupils with autism and training for youth workers and parents has been delivered by EA and MCA. Life skills training has

been provided for adolescent age group through the development of collaborative training with the Education Authority, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Occupational Therapy.

In addition, the EA and Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) are working collaboratively to ensure the improved provision for pupils with autism and their families. These include an early intervention model which involves bespoke training to clusters of Nursery, Playschool and other Early Years settings; transfer training to children in P7 year; joint EA/HSCT life skills awareness training to parents and to individual pupils; and expansion of training in Further Education colleges for pupils transitioning with follow-up visit to employment and education settings.

DE is represented on the Autism Strategy Implementation Group which is collectively responsible for monitoring progress against the actions and reflecting how implementation is progressing. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has overall responsibility for the preparation of a subsequent report that will also consider the impact of the Strategy's actions over time.

Minister O'Dowd is confident that the education-related actions in the Action Plan will help to ensure that children and young people with autism are provided with high quality education services that evolve to meet their needs as they progress through the education system. DE remains committed to the close collaboration between the Education and Health sectors, and other Departments, in supporting pupils with special educational needs, including those with autism.

Yours sincerely

Russell

RUSSELL WELSH
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer