

Written Ministerial Statement

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

PROGRESS OF THE CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL AUTISM STRATEGY (2013-2020) AND ACTION PLAN (2013-2016) AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2015

Published on 13 November 2015.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The purpose of this statement is to advise the Assembly that I have placed in the Assembly Library, a Progress Report on the implementation of the cross-departmental Autism Strategy (2013-2020) and Action Plan (2013-2016).

As members will be aware, the Strategy and Action Plan were developed to help improve services and support for people with autism, their families and carers, throughout their lives. This Progress Report provides a summary on the status of each of the actions contained in the Strategy Action Plan, together with a brief narrative highlighting key areas of progress over the last year and a look ahead to challenges in the coming year.

As we are around 18 months from when the Strategy and Action Plan were launched, I wanted to share with you the progress and ongoing work that is taking place to develop and extend post-diagnostic autism services, not just through my Department and the HSC, but through all Government Departments and their Arms Length Bodies and Agencies.

It is also important to acknowledge the work of the community and voluntary sector in this area - which continues to provide advice, support, training, social activities, short breaks and housing to individuals with autism, their parents/carers and siblings. They also provide services, support, friendship and advice to families and individuals through small local groups, and many of the larger third sector organisations have been commissioned by the statutory sector to deliver specific services, guidance or staff training.

Many of the key themes of the Strategy are progressing well, with better support available to access services for people with autism, their families and carers. This has been achieved by providing autism training for front line staff, education professionals, youth workers and parents of children with autism. There is also better awareness of support services available to families, through a number of ongoing initiatives, including improved Parents and Carers Education Programmes, signposting by way of the Family Support NI website and through HSC Trusts, as part of their triaging process, providing families with information about how to access support services whilst waiting on autism specific assessment.

I would like to inform members of just a few of the innovative actions that have been progressed by joint working arrangements involving a number of government Departments and their agencies, such as the Northern Trust's 'One-Stop' Adult Autism Advisory Service in Ballymena which was the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, available to people aged 16 and over with a diagnosis of autism, to help provide advice and support on key aspects of their daily lives including health, education and social security benefits.

A similar 'First Stop Shop', located in Belfast Central Library, was also launched by the Belfast HSC Trust in co-operation with DEL and DSD, and this operates as a drop-in facility for clients, to answer employment-related queries and to provide careers or benefits advice.

The Northern HSC Trust now also provides an Autism Paediatric Intervention Initial Advice Clinic, via a telephone call appointment offered to those referred for specialist treatment. Initial autism specific advice is provided to help parents/carers to manage the difficulties they are facing.

As part of its Assured Skills project, the Department for Employment and Learning has engaged with Specialisterne (a social enterprise that works to enable jobs within the IT Sector for people with autism) to pilot four places for participants with autism. Specialisterne not only recruited the four participants and identified job placement opportunities, but delivered training to the Assured Skills team; the two training providers (South Eastern Regional College and Belfast Met), and to staff within the placement companies.

The Department for Regional Development launched the Access Travel Wallet in April 2014. It is designed to assist people with a disability and/or communication difficulties, such as people with autism, to travel independently. It is also intended to help public transport staff have a better understanding of the travel requirements of such passengers.

Although there has been significant progress in many areas, it is undoubtedly the case that the considerable increase in referrals has created a major challenge for the Health and Social Care Sector and particularly their ASD teams. Over the past six years, referrals of children and young people for assessment have increased from around **1,500** to **2,936** per annum. As there are a limited number of clinicians with the appropriate skills working in this area, this has inevitably resulted in longer waiting times for the first assessment and ultimate diagnosis.

I fully understand that an increase in waiting times is stressful and upsetting for families however, based on current service capacity autism services are unable to keep pace with demand. The Health and Social Care Board are reviewing the process of diagnosis with the aim of identifying more efficient methods of assessment and maximising clinical time, but still delivering a high quality diagnosis.

Given the scale of challenges I face in the current financial climate, it is simply not possible to guarantee the early intervention as outlined in the Autism Strategy, without additional funding to further develop autism specific assessment services. As I have reiterated before, such pressures are a fact of life. Therefore, to break out of this cycle we have to intensify our efforts to reform our thinking, processes and services, while at the same time, continuing to deliver the services people need.

It is with that aim the HSC Board is also working with all HSC Trusts to develop a new standard operating model which will focus on developing early intervention teams and seek to integrate and align autism services with other child development and young people's mental health services. It is anticipated that, in the medium to longer term, this will help in the development of new ways of working with a view to improving access to a timely assessment and diagnosis and provision of support services.

A copy of the Progress Report will also be published on my Department's website.