

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES – SHORT BREAKS

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Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): I am pleased to be able to update Members on plans to improve services for children with disabilities.

I know this has been an area of concern across the House. I very much share those concerns and have stated publicly that the current situation regarding provision is not sustainable.

The plans I am announcing today involve both increasing short breaks capacity and expanding family, therapeutic and behavioural supports in the community.

They will be supported by up to £13m a year in additional multi-year funding, including up to £2m for the rest of the current financial year.

As Members will be aware, there has been increased demand for family support, short breaks, residential care and transitions support across services for children with disabilities. For some time, demand has outstripped supply with a substantial number of families on waiting lists and a growing number of children on the edge of care.

With a shortfall in residential placements, Trusts have been repurposing short breaks units for longer term residential placements. As a result, short breaks services across much of Northern Ireland have been unavailable.

I am confident that the funding I have announced will deliver improvements in a matter of months. I expect clear and measurable improvements in short breaks, but this is also about providing a much greater level of support in the family home.

I want to underline that making additional funding available will not deliver expanded services by itself. We will also need to have sufficient levels of staffing. A combined effort between statutory and voluntary sector partners will be required.

I do not need to remind the Assembly that additional monies are in very short supply, given the very severe and ongoing budgetary pressures.

Announcing this allocation for short breaks and community supports does not mean more funding is also available for other pressing areas of provision across health and social care. The exact opposite is true. It will be mean there is less money to be spent elsewhere.

Having assessed the options for services for children with disabilities, I have concluded that not releasing this funding would be tantamount to a catastrophic cut to services. That is something I have promised to avoid.

I can assure the House that the shortfall in short breaks provision has been an increasing issue of concern for my Department and the wider HSC system.

My officials have progressed a significant body of work to develop a Framework for Children with Disabilities for HSC Trusts. The full implementation of this will require sustained investment and workforce development over the next several years. However, the scale of this challenge should not deter us delivering better solutions and outcomes today.

In discussions with my Department, Trusts have highlighted the scale of the challenges in delivering services, which will take time and investment to address. However, I am pleased to report each Trust indicated that several supports could be rapidly expanded to provide the space for medium term actions to improve short breaks capacity.

I want to pay tribute to the recent Spotlight documentary "I Am Not Okay" which highlighted the unacceptable current situation very effectively.

I met yesterday with families featured in the documentary, accompanied by representatives from the Children's Law Centre. I hope I was able to reassure them that I am determined to do my utmost to put lasting improvements in place.

No instant solutions are available. However, with a collective and determined effort, we can make a difference and secure better outcomes for children and families.

Minister Nesbitt MLA