

HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 14 APRIL 2021

JOINT AUTISM REVIEW GROUP

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To present the outcome and findings of the Joint Review Group established to examine the autism provision within Darlington Borough Council and to consider the most appropriate way to progress the key themes identified by the Joint Review Group.

Summary

2. At a meeting of the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee held on 30 January 2020, a draft Terms of Reference (**Appendix 1**) in relation to autism provision in Darlington was approved by the Committee and it was agreed to establish a Joint Autism Review Group with the Adults and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committees.
3. Members of each Scrutiny Committee nominated representatives to participate in the Review and comments were provided from officers from the Children, Education, Adults and Public Health Service areas on the Quad of Aims (**Appendix 2**).
4. Although an initial meeting of the Review Group was held on 2 March 2020, where Officers from Darlington Borough Council were also in attendance, the review group did not meet again until 24 February 2021 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. A number of issues have been considered and discussed at the meetings and the notes of those meetings are attached (**Appendix 3**), along with the recommendations.
6. The Review Group recommended that the Adults, Children and Young People and Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee give consideration to the recommendation that a Cross Party Autism Working Group be established to progress the key themes identified by the Review Group, and that, if agreed, the recommendation be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration.
7. In considering the recommendations of the Review Group, Members are asked to consider whether the establishment of a Cross Party Autism Working Group is the appropriate way forward to progress the key themes which have been identified through the Review Group.
8. As Members will be aware, the Council's democratic arrangements support the scrutiny function and there is no reference to the governance arrangements around

the establishment of working groups, so it may be more appropriate for this Committee to agree to monitor and progress the key themes as part of its work on-going work programme.

Recommendation

9. That, taking into account the views of the Adults Scrutiny Committee and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee as detailed in paragraph 15, the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee consider the most appropriate way to progress the key themes identified by the Review Group.

Councillor A Scott
Chair of Joint Autism Review Group

Hannah Fay : 5801

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and Disorder
Health and Well Being	The initiative could have a positive impact on people's health and well-being.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There are no issues which this report needs to address
Diversity	There are no issues relating to diversity which this report needs to address
Wards Affected	There are no specific Wards which are affected by this report.
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	Not a key decision
Urgent Decision	Not an urgent decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	To enable people to be more healthy and independent, to enable children with the best start in life and to provide a safe and caring community
Efficiency	The outcome of this report does not impact on the Council efficiency agenda
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

10. At the initial meeting of the Review Group on 20 March, Officers from Darlington Borough Council informed Members of the work that had been undertaken to date in Darlington and Members held an in-depth discussion in respect of the services available in Darlington for residents with autism, identifying a number of key areas for further consideration.
11. The Chair of the Review Group and the Cabinet Member with the Adults Portfolio met with Officers from the Commissioning Team in January 2021 prior to the Review Group reconvening, to gain an understanding of the commissioning arrangements for autism services in Darlington and to identify an approach to progress the review. Reference was made to the 2018 Autism Self-Assessment Framework which was recognised as a useful tool to enable Members of the review group to identify gaps in services.
12. At the meeting of the Review Group on 24 February 2021 Members held an in-depth discussion regarding the 2018 Autism Self-Assessment Framework.
13. The Review Group identified a number of key themes requiring further investigation concluded that a Cross Party Autism Working Group be established to progress the key themes of training and awareness, support, diagnosis and employment.

Consultation

14. As the review is joint across three scrutiny Committees, this report has been circulated electronically to Members of the Adults and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to give them the opportunity to consider and respond to the recommendations contained in this report. Unfortunately, due to timescales, it was not possible for the report to be considered at a formal meeting of those Scrutiny Committees.
15. Responses from the Members of the Adults and Children and Young People Scrutiny Committees have been limited, however the views of one Member who did respond were in line with the recommendations of the Joint Review Group.

Constitution

16. In considering how to monitor and progress the key themes, Members are asked to give consideration to the Council's Constitution
17. As Members will be aware, the Council's democratic arrangements support the scrutiny function and there is no reference to the governance arrangements around the establishment of working groups, so it may be more appropriate for this Committee to agree to monitor and progress the key themes as part of its on-going work programme.
18. If Members agree to adopt this approach, it will be less resource intensive for Officers as the work will be included as part of the scheduled meetings. If there are particular areas of concern, the Review Group could be reconvened to look at

those areas and report back to this Scrutiny Committee.

19. If a working group is to be established some thought will need to be given to its membership, frequency and reporting arrangements and a recommendation will need to be made to Cabinet.

JOINT REVIEW GROUP TO EXAMINE AUTISM PROVISION WITHIN DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

REASON FOR REQUEST?	RESOURCE (WHAT OFFICER SUPPORT WOULD YOU REQUIRE?)
<p>To review and understand the provisions and services and contractual arrangements between this Council and our providers who provide the Autism provisions, diagnoses and support services for Darlington.</p> <p>To ascertain that the best services possible are provided for the benefit of individuals on the autistic spectrum to enable them to thrive. To hold ourselves and our partner organisations accountable for the services provided.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives from relevant partner organisations, for example (and not limited to) Durham Constabulary, DDFS, TEWV, NHS, CCG, CQC, NEAS etc. • Relevant Council Officers where necessary • Independent advisor(s) where necessary.
PROCESS (HOW CAN SCRUTINY ACHIEVE THE ANTICIPATED OUTCOME?)	HOW WILL THE OUTCOME MAKE A DIFFERENCE?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Examine organisations, partners and the services they provide. 2. Make an evaluation of the benefits to individuals on the Autism Spectrum and their carers of the services provided and investigate their effectiveness and value to the service users. 3. Discuss possible improvements to the services and provisions that may be highlighted by Scrutiny and/or 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ongoing accountability via scrutiny of partners who provide services and provision. Ongoing scrutiny of any arrangements between partners, and partners and service users to provide assurance that they are in the best interest of the service users.. 2. Any reasonable recommendations for improvements outlined by ongoing investigation and scrutiny to be given reasonable consideration. 3. To gain a better understanding of the needs of individuals with autism and their carers and the services provided to them by this Council.

<p>service users, thereby enabling meaningful inclusion of those on the Autism Spectrum and their parents/carers within the Scrutiny process in line with best practice as defined by the current Autism Strategy.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. That this Council leads with and is an active proponent of good services for individuals with Autism, champions best practice within Darlington and plays an active role in keeping themselves and partners accountable.5. Darlington be recognised as an Autism Friendly Town.
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Signed Councillor Rachel Mills Date
(Member of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee)

Appendix 2

Comments on Quad of Aims from Service Areas

CHILDRENS

Any recommendations and improvement in the service area will be welcome. A caveat would be that the outcomes will be achieved when timely diagnosis takes place, something which is not effective at the moment, and as provided by CAMHS is out of our control to some degree. We believe Speech and Language therapists have to be recruited to provide input to the diagnosis and there is a national shortage!!

However; we would look forward to contributing in the main from an Early Help, CAP and Lifestages perspective as these services are instrumental in working within the autism spectrum.

EDUCATION

I think it is positive that scrutiny are considering this need and it demonstrates members interest and involvement in SEND issues. The base at Hurworth is contracted by the LA and funded through the ESFA so there should be no MTFP implications in this quad of aims in terms of the base. Any recommended significant changes may, however, impact on the High Needs budget. It is important to note that the base only offers placements for secondary age pupils and if any recommendations are made for increased primary support this would be an additional pressure on HNB.

Due to DfE funding arrangements any change in commissioning the base or pupils' numbers would have a long (likely to be 2 academic years) lead in time.

I would suggest Graham Easterlow as Head of Service should provide officer support rather than a case officer. The Parent Carer Forum would also be a useful mechanism for obtaining parent/carer views.

ADULTS

I would like to see the reason for the request to include other partners, especially NHS, but also other community stakeholders, rather than a focus on 'contractual arrangements between this Council and our providers' It is an issue that cuts across all age groups and communities. This is reflected within the cross scrutiny focus, but not necessarily within the reason for the review.

PUBLIC HEALTH

The proposed approach is shared across 3 Scrutiny Committees , I think that is positive rather than each committee addressing issues separately. Earlier this week I attended a Health and Housing Scrutiny Pre meet with Cllrs Bell and Clarke and Cllr Bell indicated that he was in agreement that the Health and Housing Committee would be the lead

I have some concern about the expected level of " Officer support" indicated in the Resources Required part of the form. A number of the Members are new and will have not operated one of these before , they will need clarity from Democratic Office that the work is to be largely conducted by members

This is a topic of great interest across the committees , so it is work that will be welcomed. I am also pleased to see reference to Autism Friendly Town , actions have already been progressed on that.

AUTISM JOINT REVIEW GROUP

2nd March 2020

PRESENT – Councillor A Scott (Chair), Councillors Bartch, Bell, Curry, Layton, Mills and Renton

APOLOGIES – Councillor Heslop

Following the decision by the Adults, Children and Young People and Health and Housing Scrutiny Committees to establish a Joint Review Group to examine the Autism Provision, the Group met to receive an overview of work undertaken to date in Darlington and to consider how it wished to undertake its review, noting the aims to champion best practice, improve awareness and scrutinise what was not working well.

Details were provided of the work undertaken to make Darlington an autism friendly town which included the introduction of Quiet Hour in the Cornmill Centre; roll out of a training programme to Council frontline staff and a number of hotels in the town. Work had been undertaken with DWP to improve the employment opportunities for people with autism however this had limited success; and work undertaken with schools to implement autism ambassador proved challenging.

Discussion ensued in respect of services available in Darlington and reference was made to two significant incidents in relation to abuse of inpatients with autism and learning disabilities. Members highlighted that current services for Darlington residents were very limited.

Concern was raised in respect of formal diagnosis of autism; that the diagnosis tool was inadequate; and diagnosis for adults, in particular females, was very poor. Reference was made to mental health issues associated with autism diagnosis; and the need to improve awareness of pathways and of support available. Members identified a number of areas for further consideration which included a scope of autism services that were available to bid for, noting that the bidding process needed to be more autism friendly; the need to explore what support was on offer in Darlington schools; the role of Health and Well Being Board in reviewing delays in diagnosis; to identify national framework to benchmark Darlington against; and to ascertain from the LGA what work had been undertaken by other Local Authorities

Members felt that autism should be taken into consideration in all Council decisions; and Members agreed that the Darlington MP be contacted to lobby for improved diagnosis for children, young people and adults with autism.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That the Chair and Councillor Mills meet with the Assistant Director, Commissioning, Performance and Transformation to discuss commissioning arrangements in respect of autism services.

(b) That the MP for Darlington be contacted to lobby for improved diagnosis for children, young people and adults with autism.

AUTISM JOINT REVIEW GROUP

24th February 2021 (via Teams)

PRESENT – Councillor A Scott (Chair), Bell, Curry, Heslop Layton, Mills

APOLOGIES – Councillor Renton

The Chair of the Review Group reminded Members of the initial meeting of the group that was held in March 2020; and that the group had been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair and Councillor Mills met with the Commissioning Team in January 2021 to discuss a way forward for the group. Reference was made to the Autism Self-Assessment Framework which was undertaken in 2018 and it was agreed that the Autism Self-Assessment Framework be shared with the Review Group, to enable the group to identify gaps in the provision and next steps.

Discussion ensued on the Autism Self-Assessment Framework:

- Members noted that the Autism Lead Role for the Local Authority was designated to the Assistant Director of Adult Services; that this role was in the process of being appointed to; and highlighted the importance of a named lead being in post.
- Reference was made to the Autism Steering Group and the Members discussed the suggestion of political representation on this group. It was suggested that the Chair of the Steering group could be invited to participate in the review group.
- Members noted that data recorded by the Local Authority for children and young people with autism was robust, however the data collected for adults with autism was sparse and as such the full picture was not known.
- Members agreed that awareness in respect of adults with autism was very limited.
- It was reported that there was very limited training for professionals in respect of assessing people who present with mental health problems and autism. Members noted that some staff within the Local Authority had received awareness training, however the self-assessment identified that 600 members of staff were eligible for training. Members highlighted the need for consistency in the quality of training. Members agreed that further work was required to identify gaps in training.
- In respect of diagnosis, Members felt that there was an invisible co-hort of undiagnosed people that were on the spectrum; that these individuals could often present at partner agencies for a number of different reasons; and this highlighted the need for improved partnership working to help obtain a diagnosis.

- Members discussed the challenges faced by individuals and families in obtaining a referral and felt that significant work was needed to make the autism diagnostic pathway more accessible. Members felt that schools should play a bigger role in helping to identify children and young people with autism. Members agreed that further investigation was required in respect of referrals and diagnosis.
- Members questioned the availability of support groups for parents, carers and people with autism and were advised that whilst there were no Council run groups there were other groups available.
- Members highlighted the need to acknowledge the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health and that support for people with autism needed to be prioritised.
- Members suggested the use of council owned facilities to run autism friendly events; reference was made a number of initiatives and events that had been in place prior to the pandemic; and that consideration should be given to continue these in the future.
- Members noted that regular employment for adults with autism was a key area to help improve quality of life. Members agreed that there was a requirement for improving awareness and training for employers to help support existing employees that were either undiagnosed or not open about their diagnosis.
- In relation to the Criminal Justice System it was report that people with autism were more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and this was a key area that could help identify undiagnosed individuals.

Members agreed that training and awareness, support, diagnosis and employment were key themes requiring further investigation.

Particular discussion ensued on the future of this review group. Members proposed that this review group becomes a cross party working group to progress the key themes.

IT WAS AGREED –

- (a) That Members support the proposal to establish a Cross Party Autism Review Group.
- (b) That the Adults, Children and Young People and Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee consider the following recommendation of the Autism Joint Review Group:-
 - (i) That a Cross Party Autism Working Group be established to progress the key themes identified by the Review Group.

- (c) That, if agreed, the above recommendation be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration.