

Gwenda Thomas AC / AM
Y Dirprwy Weinidog Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Deputy Minister for Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-04-492
Ein cyf/Our ref GT/00422/13

William Powell AM
Chair, Petitions Committee
Ty Hywel
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17 August 2013

Dear William,

Thank you for your letter dated 26 June to the Minister for Education and Skills regarding the Petition that you have received from the National Autistic Society Pembrokeshire Branch on diagnosis for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). I am responding as this matter falls within my portfolio.

It is essential that children and their parents have timely access to ASD diagnosis and support services. The diagnostic pathway is led by Local Health Boards and the process can be very complex and time consuming as multi-disciplinary and specialist assessments must be carried out by a team of experts working across health boards and local authorities.

Since we launched the ASD Strategic Action Plan in 2008 much has been achieved to improve autism services in Wales. We have an established ASD infrastructure; there is now an ASD lead, a steering group and a local action plan in every local authority area. Although good progress has been made we acknowledge that there is still a lot more that needs to be done to make a real difference to the lives of children with ASD and their parents and carers.

We are currently refreshing the ASD Strategic Action Plan and to begin this work last November we held three stakeholder consultation events in partnership with the National Autistic Society, Autism Cymru and Autism Initiatives. The feedback we received will be used as the basis for the future priorities for action. At these events one of the main concerns raised by parents and carers were long waiting times for diagnosis and the differences in waiting times across local authority areas.

To help us to determine what actions need be taken, an ASD expert advisory group is being established to develop the refreshed ASD Strategic Action Plan. Representatives will be invited from the voluntary sector, local authorities, health boards and relevant Welsh Government departments. The draft Action Plan will be published for public consultation in the new year.

On 18 June Paul Davies AM raised an Oral Assembly Question asking the First Minister to make a statement on autism. As concerns about waiting times in Pembrokeshire were highlighted, the First Minister agreed to provide a written update on the local situation. Hywel Dda Local Health Board has since advised that an action plan will be implemented from September to address the waiting list in Pembrokeshire which currently stands at four years and comprises approximately 150 children.

To support improvements in children's ASD diagnosis we are part funding the Wales Autistic Research Centre (WARC) at Cardiff University to establish a research-policy-practice hub for children's diagnosis and have funded WARC to undertake development work on ASD diagnostic tools for children.

On 3 July I met the Chief Executive of the National Autistic Society to discuss autism policy. We spoke about waiting times and compliance with the NICE guidelines on the 'Recognition, Referral and Diagnosis of Children and Young People on the Autism Spectrum' as referred to in the Petition. Health professionals are required to take NICE guidance into account in the planning and delivery of services as they are designed to drive and measure quality improvements and describe what a good service looks like. This issue will be considered by the ASD expert advisory group as part of the ASD Strategy refresh.

The Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Bill will transform the way that social care services are accessed and delivered in Wales. The Bill gives people a right to a social care assessment which will be proportionate to their needs and also requires the provision of information, advice and assistance to give people greater knowledge of what services are available locally and how to access the services they need. I will ensure that there continues to be collaborative working so that the refreshed ASD Strategic Action Plan complements the provisions contained within the Bill that will give citizens greater voice and control over the services they receive.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Gwenda'.

Gwenda Thomas AC / AM

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Deputy Minister for Social Services