

REPORT TO COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE – THURSDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 2021

A NEW AUTISM STRATEGY FOR ABERDEENSHIRE

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the development of a new autism strategy for Aberdeenshire, including an overview of relevant policies and plans, services and supports, and key milestones.

2. Recommendations

The committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note that work has commenced to develop an updated life-span autism strategy for Aberdeenshire.**
- 2.2 Endorse the collaboration between autistic people of all ages, Education and Children’s Services (ECS), Aberdeenshire Health and Social Care Partnership (AHSCP), third sector partners and wider Aberdeenshire Council, NHS and public sector services in the development of a new autism strategy.**

3. Purpose and decision-making route

- 3.1 Autistic people experience significant inequalities, particularly in terms of income and health. For example, autistic people are at higher risk of having physical and mental health conditions, and autistic adults die approximately 12 years younger than the general population.¹ Only 22% of autistic adults are in any kind of employment².
- 3.2 AHSCP and ECS are bringing this report to Communities Committee to highlight the need for a system wide approach to the development of a new autism strategy, particularly in relation to poverty and inequalities, housing and employment.
- 3.3 Aberdeenshire Integration Joint Board (IJB) recently approved the development of an updated autism strategy for Aberdeenshire. Further updates will be presented to the Aberdeenshire IJB and Education and Children’s Services Committee in November and December 2021.

4. Discussion

National strategies and plans

- 4.1 [The Scottish Strategy for Autism](#) was published in 2011, with a ten-year life span. This was followed up in 2018 with [further priorities](#) centered on 4

¹ [A public health approach to reducing health inequalities among adults with autism | British Journal of General Practice \(bjgp.org\)](#)

² [Outcomes for disabled people in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

strategic outcomes: A Healthy Life; Choice and Control; Independence; and Active Citizenship.

- 4.2 A joint national autism and learning disabilities plan '[Towards Transformation](#)', was published in March 2021 outlining future actions. Priority areas include improvements in diagnostic and post diagnostic support, mental health support, engagement and participation and training in key settings.
- 4.3 Any future strategic planning work will need to take account of [The Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland](#), including investment in support, enabling rights and capabilities, collaboration and co-design, [Principles of Good Transitions](#) and [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#), ensuring that children and young people have a key role in the development and implementation of the strategy.

Local context

- 4.4 At a population level, it is estimated that there are 2,704³ ⁴ autistic people in Aberdeenshire. This is made up of approximately 507 children and young people. 1,668 people are aged 16-64 and 529 people are aged 65 and over. Approximately 885 autistic people are estimated to also have a learning disability.
- 4.5 AHSCP provides a range of health, social work and community outreach services and supports to autistic adults, primarily through Community Learning Disability Teams (CLDT's) and Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT's), based on eligible need.
- 4.6 The AHSCP Autism Strategic Development Group, previously the Autism Strategic Outcomes Group, was restarted in 2019, in recognition of the need to review AHSCP's autism services and recommend future actions. The group comprises of colleagues from AHSCP community mental health teams, NHS, public health, Police Scotland, Live Life Aberdeenshire and SAMH. The group is also linked to the [Getting It Right For Every Child](#) (GIRFEC) Children with a Disability Group, providing a link between children and adult services.
- 4.7 Education and Children's Services (ECS) provide a range of services and supports to autistic children and young people. Key work includes support for young people and children in schools, building capacity and training for school staff, the development of autism friendly schools, and ongoing support and improvement of transition planning for young people. Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are currently developing a neurodevelopmental pathway, and colleagues from ECS are involved in this development work.
- 4.8 The GIRFEC Children with a Disability Group has been involved in work to review the current Aberdeenshire autism strategy. Individual members of the group have also been engaging in national conversations on autism to guide thinking on a plan for the new Aberdeenshire strategy. In 2019 and

³ [The microsegmentation of the autism spectrum: research project - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

⁴ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/population-estimates/mid-year-population-estimates/mid-2019>

2020 a series of focus groups with parents of children with additional support needs were held in order to gain their views and experiences. The information gathered helped to inform work by identifying key themes for development. The group has also carried out an audit of work undertaken by services with regards to the outcomes and priorities of the 2018 – 2021 [Scottish Strategy for Autism](#). Through this process, members have gained a greater shared understanding of the work each service has been involved in, as well as the challenges and successes.

- 4.9 Prior to health and social care integration (2013-14), Aberdeenshire Council developed an autism strategy and action plan, which had a longevity until 2024. The precise governance and implementation arrangements are unclear, however the GIRFEC Children with a Disability Group have confirmed that this strategy was developed by ECS. Unfortunately, the delivery plan was never approved by adult services at the time, and it would appear that no governance arrangements were agreed to take forward the adult services actions. While a number of priorities have been met, it is recognised that there is still a significant amount of work required to meet the needs of autistic people across Aberdeenshire.
- 4.10 With regards to adult diagnostic services, there has been a recent positive outcome in this work stream. Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership and AHSCP have recently commissioned and launched a joint adult autism assessment team (4 clinical hours per week). This service accepts self-referrals and there are now over 100 people who have referred themselves to this service.
- 4.11 AHSCP recently took part in the Scottish Government's independent evaluation of the national strategy by holding a local workshop with Blake Stevenson on 11th March 2021. Autistic people, family, carers, third sector partners and AHSCP staff attended this workshop. Key themes coming out of the workshop included the need for more involvement of autistic people in service development, clearer information on local autism support groups and services, improved transitions for young people, better autism training, improved mental health support and employability services. Participants were very clear that their preference was for an autism strategy to be developed, as opposed to a standalone action/delivery plan. A summary of autistic people's views can be found in appendix 1.
- 4.12 Looking ahead to future strategic priorities, diagnostic and post diagnostic support, transitions, autism training, reducing health inequalities, improving the understanding and acceptance of autism in communities, meaningful participation and employability have all been identified as key areas for development and improvement across all ages.
- 4.13 In relation to engagement and participation, the project team are committed to co-producing the strategy with autistic people and other key stakeholders. The team are in the process of seeking input from autistic people of all ages in terms of how people would like to be involved in developing the strategy.
- 4.14 The project team also plan to organise an autism event, hopefully in March 2022. The plan at this stage is to run a Grampian wide event, which would include autistic people, service providers and colleagues from across key agencies. The team also intend to gather autistic people's stories and

experiences and hope to publish these (with consent) within the final strategy document.

5. Summary and next steps

5.1 The development of a dedicated autism strategy will:

5.1.1 Enable a more focused approach to identifying and responding to the needs of autistic people across Aberdeenshire.

5.1.2 Facilitate a collaborative approach at key developmental stages across the life span (childhood, adolescence and adulthood).

5.1.3 Enhance the ability to report to the IJB and ECS Committee in a more outcomes focused manner in all matters related to autism.

5.2 With regards to next steps, the following timeline outlines the key milestones for developing the strategy:

5.2.1 Start community engagement with autistic people, families, carers, third sector partners, ECS, AHSCP and wider NHS, Council and public sector partners – **by end of September 2021**

5.2.2 Strategic review of autism services – **by end of December 2021**

5.2.3 First draft of strategy developed and presented to IJB and ECS Committees – **Spring 2022**

6. Council priorities, implications and risk

6.1 In reference to the council priorities, the autism strategy will help deliver the strategic priorities 'Education' and 'Health and Wellbeing'. The strategy will also help deliver against:

6.1.1 Education and Children's Services Plan Priority 2 - Embedding GIRFEC, and Priority 3- Support Inclusive, Vibrant, and Healthy Communities.

6.1.2 Aberdeenshire Children's Services Plan Priority 3 – supporting children with a disability and their families.

6.1.3 AHSCP Strategic Plan – All priorities.

7. An impact assessment screening process has been undertaken for the purpose of this report and an impact assessment is not required at this stage. Impact assessments are in the process of being undertaken for the strategy development process and will be presented at the relevant development stage to IJB and ECS Committee.

7.1 The following impact assessments will be undertaken as part of the strategy development process:

- Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing
- Equalities and Fairer Scotland Duty
- Health Inequalities

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial			X
Staffing			X
Equalities			X
Fairer Scotland Duty			X
Town Centre First			X
Sustainability			x
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing			x

7.2 The following risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a corporate level:

7.2.1 Changes in government policy; working with other organisations.

7.3 The following IJB risks have been identified on a strategic level with not developing an autism strategy for Aberdeenshire:

7.3.1 **IJB 2** Health and social care policy alignment. AHSCP do not have an up-to-date dedicated autism strategy and action plan. Not having this in place risks services not being aligned with national and local strategies and the needs of autistic people. Lack of alignment also carries significant reputational risk.

7.3.2 **IJB 4** Service capacity/business transformation. By not having a dedicated autism strategy AHSCP risks delivering services for autistic people that are not fit for the future.

7.3.3 **IJB 6** Risk of not adequately involving and engaging with our patients /clients, the public, staff and partners. By not involving key stakeholders AHSCP risks delivering services that do not meet the needs of autistic people across Aberdeenshire.

7.3.4 **IJB 8** Working effectively with partner organisations. By not working effectively with partner organisations, AHSCP risks underusing/ignoring available resources and capabilities within communities.

7.3.5 **IJB 10** Risk of failure to deliver standards of care expected by the people of Aberdeenshire in the right place at the right time. By not having a strategic plan in place risks services not being delivered effectively, impacting on both autistic people, families, carers and the quality-of-service delivery.

8. Scheme of Governance

8.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

Geraldine Fraser
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August 2021

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Appendix 1

Views of Aberdeenshire Autism Services – March 2021

Independent Review of the Scottish Strategy for Autism, commissioned by Scottish Government.

The following is a summary of views expressed by autistic people who attended a workshop facilitated by Blake Stevenson in March 2021. The purpose of the workshop was to find out how effective the national autism strategy had been in improving the lives of autistic people in Aberdeenshire.

What is working well?

- I've had the opportunity to help develop services.
- The adult autism assessment team is a positive development.
- There are good peer support groups, but they are hidden.

What are the key challenges when trying to access services and supports?

- Getting support during the pandemic has been challenging.
- It can be more challenging to get support in rural areas.
- Post diagnostic support. Support is not joined up or coordinated across Aberdeenshire after you get a diagnosis.
- There are lots of autistic people who aren't on the radar of services.
- My experience is that there is no support at all.
- There is a lack of coordination between services.
- The local strategy has not been implemented effectively, and we feel like we are firefighting.

What services and supports are needed for the future?

- Autistic people must be at the heart of what happens next.
- Some sort of autism hub. There is no dedicated hub where I can find out more about autism.
- We need better support to communicate our needs.
- Information has to be accessible and easy to read.
- There needs to be better links between children's and adult services.
- We need a post diagnostic pathway that links to third sector services and community mental health teams.
- Specialist autism training is needed for community mental health teams.
- We need more mental health and emotional support.
- Mental health services need to be accessible for autistic people.
- I want to be more involved in decision making.
- Services need to be honest if there is a lack of funding to support us.
- There needs to be more training to improve the understanding of autism in the community.
- A person-centered approach for all services and supports is needed. Services need to work with people, not conditions.
- Autistic people must be given tools to drive their own lives.