

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

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Your Ref:

Our Ref: CORR-1782-2021

Date: 7th June 2021

Dear *Eilish*,

Motion: Immediate need to tackle waiting lists for diagnosis of autism in children.

Thank you for your correspondence of 17 May 2021 in relation to the Motion passed by Belfast City Council on 4 May.

I am acutely aware of the extensive waiting lists for autism assessments and the challenging circumstances this presents for children, their families and carers. I realise the impact this can have on their emotional health and wellbeing, on their personal development and on their education and I acknowledge that this is unacceptable.

I have publicly stated my concern that, in light of these waiting lists, families have felt moved to seek private assessment. Whilst this is a personal decision for some families, it is a prohibitive solution for many. I do not want systems and services where families feel they must take this route. However, you will know that this is not a situation that is unique to autism assessment and there is much work to be done to improve our waiting lists to services across Northern Ireland.

In recent months, mindful of the challenges that are being experienced by individuals and families who have an autism diagnosis, or who may be waiting for an assessment, I have taken a number of steps to address the need for early intervention and greater support.

You may be aware that on 8 March I published a cross-departmental Autism – Interim Strategy which sets out the key priorities which will be addressed in 2021 and 2022 with a focus on early intervention and improving pathways of care. The interim strategy will be supported by a range of outcome based actions across government departments and our health and social care sector and aligned to our Programme for Government.

As part of this interim Strategy I am committed to listening to the voices of those who matter, that is autistic people, their families and carers. Underpinning this my Department has established an Autism Forum, comprised of people with lived experience and representatives from the community and voluntary sector organisations who represent them. A role of this Forum will be to inform and co-produce a longer term autism strategy and work on this will commence later this year.

However, improving support for autistic people and indeed those waiting for an assessment is a collective responsibility for us all.

I am aware that in each of our Trust areas that multi-agency autism forums work in partnership to enhance understanding of autism within our communities, and wider society, to enable social inclusion for all. I am also aware that at least two of these Councils, Mid and East Antrim Council and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) Borough Council, have been working closely with representatives from Autism Services within their Trust areas as they work towards creating autism friendly services within their boroughs. I understand that an invitation has been extended by Belfast Trust to Belfast City Council to participate in their multi-agency autism forum and I would encourage you to avail of this opportunity to determine how, together, we can improve services and support for all.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', is positioned below the text 'Yours sincerely'.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health