

# **Cross-Party Group on Autism**

**1<sup>st</sup> September 2025**

## **Minute**

### **Present**

#### **MSPs**

Alexander Burnett (Convenor)  
Annie Wells MSP

#### **Invited guests**

Michelle Cuninghame – Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics (SEMA)  
Sofia Farzana – SEMA  
Claire Betson – Neuro By Nature

#### **Non-MSP Group Members**

Marion McLaughlin  
Mark McDonald  
Suzi Martin  
Alexandra West  
Steve Kent  
Louise Storie  
Cherie Morgan  
Stephen Caulfield  
Louise Moth  
Alison Murray  
Kabie Brook  
Helen Heppenstall  
Catherine Steedman  
Richard Ibbotson  
Tom Wightman  
David Anderson  
Maurice Frank  
Karen Moffat  
Lyndsay Macadam  
Kirsten Mutch  
Ramon Hutchinson  
Helen Mahood

Clare Kennedy  
Susan Chambers  
Jamie Ferrie  
Jen Ang  
Andrew Burnett  
Emilly Scott  
Cath Purdie  
Kate Clement  
Lauren Murray  
David Nicholson  
Jane Green  
Max Marnau  
Lesley Farm  
Kate Monahan  
Cherie Morgan  
Nora Kellock  
Michelle Graham  
Kabie Brook  
Chris Cole  
Mary McCutcheon  
Chloe Duncan  
Kate Clement  
John Grafton  
Rachel Birch  
Laura Walker  
Kristin Nicodemus

## Apologies

### Agenda item 1 (Welcome)

Alexander Burnett welcomed everyone to the meeting and sought approval for the minutes of the previous meeting which was agreed unanimously with one amendment to note David Anderson is NASUWT President for Scotland.

Unfortunately, Tom Arthur not able to attend the meeting.

### Agenda item 2 (Meet the Member – Wise Yins)

Unfortunately, Ikra Mahmood was unable to attend the meeting, so Sofia Farzana read out an introduction to Wise Yins.

Mission – to support individuals with ASN from Black, Asian & Ethnic Minority

communities where families can often find it very difficult to find support due to barriers accessing support and facing stigma.

Wise Yins have run creative expression projects and seek to establish a safe and empowered country where everyone is included. Their mantra is that 'disability is not inability'. The organisation would direct people to contact them by email ([wiseyins@gmail.com](mailto:wiseyins@gmail.com)) and via social media.

## Agenda item 3 (Michelle Cuninghame & Sofia Farzana – Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics, Claire Betson - Neuro by Nature)

### **Michelle Cuninghame & Sofia Farzana – SEMA**

SEMA began in 2023 and have grown in the past two years. They have established peer support groups and created spaces for individuals to discuss issues such as 'being autistic during Ramadan'.

A number of people have sought and received diagnosis following interactions with SEMA, which has enabled them to gain support in work and within families. Cultural barriers exist in services but also within families – SEMA's work is helping to tackle these stigmas.

SEMA are capturing lived experience stories to share via their website and also via Inspiring Scotland. Rather than an academic project it was done as a grassroots approach.

Michelle spoke, via a video, about experiences of racialised autistic people.

Difficult to get research on the experiences of racialised autistics due to the small numbers involved.

Impacts of existing barriers to accessing healthcare can mean that individuals find themselves misdiagnosed or treated poorly.

Many racialised autistic people experience micro-aggressions and discrimination, which is often worsened by a lack of cultural inclusion.

### **Claire Betson (Neuro By Nature)**

Claire spoke about how racialised identity can impact upon autistic burnout and showed a short video showing the weight of this upon an individual which leads to burnout.

It can be difficult to 'lessen the load' as community help and support is not always available due to a lack of options for people – examples cited included hair products

for Afro hair and foodstuffs which may not be available within certain communities due to the ethnic makeup of the area.

Claire cited the current racial tensions in society and the additional impact this can have on racialised autistic people with people facing burnout and dysregulation as a result of the burden being felt.

## **Agenda item 4 – Speakers (Shidrati Ali, Ikra Mahmood - Wise Yins)**

### **Shidrati Ali**

Shidrati spoke about resonance with nature. Shadrati was involved with a Nature Connection project which involved supporting 15 autistic people to connect with nature.

Shidrati spoke of how nature is often ‘othered’ and exploited, and how this can often echo the experiences of autistic people and people from ethnic minority communities.

Shidrati also spoke about the importance of having connections with nature and the protection of nature being linked to a more progressive attitude towards supporting autistic people and people from ethnic minority communities.

### **Ikra Mahmood (read by Sofia Farzana)**

Too many people feel the need to hide a diagnosis for fear of community judgement. This can leave families affected by the impact of a diagnosis but also the weight of withholding information and isolating from others in the community.

Wise Yins are working to break down barriers and help families find the sense of community they may feel they do not have access to. They seek to create a culture where disabilities are not hidden and families do not feel like they have to face things alone.

Work has been done to overcome language barriers by providing translations of information into Urdu, something which has not been done before and which is helping to tackle barriers and stigma and increase understanding.

## **Agenda item 5 – Q&A Discussion**

**Q – how can white autistic people be better allies?**

Sofia – acknowledge privilege and that racialised autistics carry significantly heavier burdens. Individuals from racialised communities cannot switch off to news from countries which they have familial and ancestral links.

Michelle – racialised autistic people face struggles and challenges that white autistic counterparts do not and this needs to be recognised.

Claire – highlighted a comment around being better allies. Good intentions are not enough. There has to be action behind intention and curiosity about the experiences of others should be encouraged. Amplify voices where the opportunity exists.

Q – what can APOs do to be more welcoming and inclusive?

Claire – recognise that there might be language barriers. Do the work behind the scenes to find information and do research.

Sofia – parent/carer organisations have approached SEMA to see how they can better support families. Word-for-word translations are not enough; these lose the impact of nuance in language so approaching individuals and organisations to get appropriate translation of information.

Q – what should diagnosis and pds be doing to support ethnic minorities

Michelle – recently went through the process. Recognising cultural differences. Don't assume, ask. Recognising nuances – for example Michelle speaks Cantonese not Mandarin but assumptions might be made.

Sofia – did provide input to GP training and resources but still facing prejudices which are based on tropes.

Q – what are the main challenges of advocating for your needs?

Claire -

Q – what is the diagnostic system like in Scotland?

Sofia – before getting onto the assessment process, individuals need to understand that they are autistic. Many are so heavily masking that they do not have the recognition of this.

Pathways are also closed in many areas and where they are not waiting times are exceptionally long and some young people may reach adulthood before a diagnosis can be achieved.

Claire – autism is something which exists for life, so systems need to be put in place now to support people.

Michelle – we know that women and girls are late-diagnosed due to understanding of autistic traits being heavily slanted towards white boys – this is then worsened further when ethnic minority status is factored in.

Sofia – there is a project on supporting neurodivergence in schools which should be looked at called Neurodiversity in Scottish School. Community-based supports, assessments and interventions are what is needed.

## Agenda item 6 - AOB

Nothing raised.