

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

3rd Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 8  
September 2021

PE1837: Provide clear direction and  
investment for autism support

## Note by the Clerk

**Petitioner** Stephen Leighton

**Petition  
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- clarify how autistic people, who do not have a learning disability and/or mental disorder, can access support and;
- allocate investment for autism support teams in every local authority or health and social care partnership in Scotland.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1837>

## Introduction

1. This is a continued petition, last considered by the PPC on [10 February 2021](#). At that meeting, the PPC agreed to continue this petition and include it in its legacy paper for its successor Committee, along with the suggestion to take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport on the various concerns raised in written submissions received on the petition.
2. Since the PPC last considered the petition written submissions have been received from Autism Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

## Background

3. Autism is regularly described as a learning disability, but out of that 67% of people who are autistic do not have a learning disability in a form commonly understood by the term. The petition raises concerns that definitions of autism as a mental disorder within the existing Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 is impacting on the ability of autistic people to receive support from local authorities and health and social care partnerships
4. The petitioner argues that the legislation requires amendment and proper acknowledgement of autism; that is neither, necessarily, a mental disorder or a learning disability as these are currently defined in the legislation.
5. Arguing for allocation of investment for autism support teams nationally, the petitioner expresses that support teams would create a care pathway for autistic people out of mental health services which currently are unequipped to provide the necessary support.
6. The Mental Welfare Commission's [Autism and complex care needs](#) report made a number of recommendations about support that health boards and health and social care partnerships should provide for people with autism. It recommended that:

‘Integration Authorities should ensure that autistic people with complex needs in community settings have a dedicated co-ordinator to oversee the full range of provisions to meet their needs’

## Committee consideration

7. The petition has received 23 written submissions to date and has been considered twice by the previous Committee.
8. At its meeting on [16 December 2020](#), the PPC agreed to write to the National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism. Written responses can be found on the petitions webpage [here](#).

## Scottish Government submission

9. The Scottish Government's submission [dated 2 December 2020](#) highlights that support for autistic people is available from a wide range of sources, including health and social care partnerships, national organisations like Scottish Autism and the National Autistic Society for Scotland and local organisations including autistic led organisations. They provide a range of support including social groups, 1:1 counselling and post diagnostic support.
10. The Scottish Government is working collaboratively with the national autism charities and autistic led organisations to deliver a national autism post diagnostic support service for people diagnosed within the last two years.

11. Following a diagnosis of autism, the submission advises that individuals, parents and carers will be routed to appropriate support which will enable individuals to understand, embrace and develop their identity as an autistic person. It further notes that it will also aim to ensure that parents and carers have access to information, support and advice to enable them to support their child's development and personal growth.
12. This is a pilot project running from December 2020 – May 2021, with the pilot then being independently evaluated and a decision made on the further development of the service.
13. The Scottish Government advises it established the National Autism Implementation Team, in partnership with Queen Margaret University, to support Health and Social Care Partnerships to consider best practice and improve service in the redesigning of autism diagnostic services.
14. The National Implementation Team is supporting NHS Boards to examine diagnostic pathways for autism and establish regional experts to assist with improving tiered autism specialisms across health boards.
15. At the same time, the submission notes that the Scottish Government is engaging with local health and social care partnerships across Scotland about why it is important for them to increase capacity for autism diagnostic services and for them to redesign services which are sustainable.
16. Following the publication of the Scottish Strategy for Autism in 2011, a national mapping exercise was undertaken and each local authority was provided with their own map of local services. Local authorities were asked to consider the strategy in each of their local areas and develop local strategies and action plans to support the needs of their local population.
17. The submission advises £1.2 m of funding was provided to support this work. The strategy also commissioned research into the economic costs of autism - this report was published in March 2018 - The microsegmentation of the autism spectrum: research project. This report provides evidence of the economic costs of autism and makes recommendations for Health and Social Care Partnerships to consider when commissioning autism services.
18. The Scottish Government notes it provides the policies, frameworks and resources to allow Integration Authorities, along with their partners, to deliver services that meet the needs of their local populations.

## Scottish Autism submission

19. In its submission [dated 11 March 2021](#), Scottish Autism welcomes the petition's call for more resources from the Scottish Government at a local level to support autistic people and their families. It believes that there continues to be an absence of consistent and accessible support services available in Scotland. Additionally, Autism Scotland also states its support for the creation of a Commission or Commissioner role to close the accountability gap, investigate

and share best practice, and work collaboratively across decision making bodies and third sector organisations.

## COSLA submission

20. In its submission [dated 30 April 2021](#), COSLA states that it understands that diagnostic support can be limited for adults whose autism presents less obviously but who nevertheless have a condition that impacts on their wellbeing. It is noted that opportunities for autistic people are provided at varying degrees in each local authority, depending on requirements. National and local support in the form of peer support groups were highlighted.
21. However, COSLA's submission noted that it currently does not support the call for a blanket approach to providing support teams or ring fenced funding. This is due to the impact of ring fencing on local authorities' ability to fund non-ring-fenced services. COSLA outline that services are not provided to autistic people on the basis of the Mental Health Act, rather they are provided following professional assessment of individual need and eligibility criteria.

## Petitioner submission

22. In a submission [dated 2 June 2021](#) in response to the submission by COSLA, the petitioner highlights that the repeated issue raised in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Rejected Referrals Report of services declining to support autism needs on the grounds of this not being a mental health issue.
23. In response to COSLA raising local eligibility criteria and Self-Directed Support (SDS) as the basis of autism services, the petitioner outlines the statutory obligation for social work services to assess care support needs for children and points to the accountability gap as evidence that people are being denied access to support.
24. The petitioner calls for social workers to be trained to the level of the National Autism Training Framework in order to assess the needs of people with autism. The submission emphasises that maintaining this skill level requires ongoing continuous professional development which is difficult to maintain.
25. Whilst the petitioner recognises that SDS budgets can be helpful for some, they note that this cannot replicate the 10 recommendations of the Scottish Government's Microsegmentation Report.
26. The submission then suggests that if autism is to be considered a mental health disorder, investment from the mental health budget could be used to create autism support teams which would in turn reduce pressure on mental health and social work services.

27. The petitioner concludes by stating that the status quo is not enough and that the submissions to this petition made by autistic people and their families demonstrates that more needs to be done.

## Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

### Clerk to the Committee

## Annexe

The following submissions are circulated in connection with consideration of the petition at this meeting—

- [PE1837/V Scottish Autism submission of 11 March 2021 \(PDF\)](#)
- [PE1837/W COSLA submission of 30 April 2021 \(PDF\)](#)

The Scottish Parliament launched a new website at the end of Session 5.

All written submissions received on the petition before May 2021 can be viewed on the petition on the [archive webpage](#). Any written submissions received on the petition after May 2021 can be viewed on its [new webpage](#).