

Response from West Lothian Council Education Executive on the consultation paper: Towards an Autism Strategy for Scotland.

West Lothian Education Executive notes the contents of the document 'Towards an Autism Strategy for Scotland' and would like to make the following comments:

The Strategy makes reference to existing legislation and guidance relevant to children and young people (pg 35). For example, Curriculum for Excellence, Getting it Right for Every Child, the Education (ASL) Act and the updated Code of Practice. West Lothian Education Executive consider that the Autism Strategy must be developed in a way that ensures there is no potential for 'unintentional discrimination' which results in a shift of resources away from pupils who may have other types of additional support needs. Consequently, it is essential that full account is taken of the above legislation and guidance that aims to improve educational and life opportunities for all our pupils and in particular for pupils who have a wide range of additional support needs.

The Strategy highlights the increase in identification and diagnosis of autistic spectrum difficulties, particularly in children. It correctly emphasises the need to continue to improve diagnostic pathways. It should be noted that the purpose of assessment and diagnosis is to identify need and to ensure that appropriate resources and interventions are put in place. Education Authorities have been effective in their response to this need and have put in place a wide range of resources. For example, developing in-school support, out-reach services, effective multi-agency working, professional development and training for staff and where required establishing specialist provision. In the current financial climate this is becoming increasingly challenging. It is therefore essential that cost implications of the proposed strategy are reviewed by Government. In particular the additional costs of providing resources and interventions to meet the needs and expectations of an increasing number of children and families where a child has been identified as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder

The Strategy refers to the paper 'The Economic Cost of Autism in the U.K' (Knapp et al 2009) where the importance of evaluating the cost effectiveness of interventions is highlighted "An effective intervention in childhood could help reduce the intensity of support needed in adult life" (pg 332). These potential savings will be realised by the sectors providing services for adults rather than by Education Authorities, and this also should be taken into account when the Strategy is costed.

West Lothian Education Executive is aware of the need for strong links between services who work with families, and the need for shared resources to ensure high quality early intervention. A holistic approach with more choices for families and participation in local planning processes (Recommendation 3) would build onto the good progress being made in developing effective diagnostic pathways. It is essential that families do not 'fall through the net' after diagnosis. Education, Social Policy, Health and the third sector need to build onto good multi-agency practices and extend support to children and families within the most appropriate setting including in our nurseries and pre-school settings. West Lothian Education Executive support the Strategy in this regard and our local strategy includes these aims.

We support Recommendation 10, that training materials related to ASD be developed and disseminated using e- CPD formats and consider this should be done within an educational context also, particularly with regard to the more general

Level 1 staff training. We note the recommendation that the Training Sub-Group of the main Reference Group be re-constituted.

West Lothian Education Executive notes Recommendation 15, that specific supports are needed for the more able individuals with ASD. We agree that Disability Services are not appropriate for these children and young people and that in many cases services and supports other than Mental Health Services are often required.

Recommendation 24 highlights the need for evaluation of existing research and consideration of what further research is necessary. It also emphasises the need to disseminate what is available. West Lothian Education Executive feels that this is particularly important with regard to what works in the classroom in terms of enhancing learning. There needs to be continuous review of impact. However, this should take account of the fact that a flexible approach to learning and teaching is required and that there is no single approach which meets the needs of all pupils who have ASD. The difficulties associated with 'real world research' and the fact that findings can be contradictory also needs to be taken into account.

West Lothian Education Executive notes that the Strategy has taken account of 'what has been achieved to date' and then focuses on 'what has still to be done'. We support the emphasis on building on existing good practice and of investigating and evaluating what works and therefore has an impact on the lives of people who have an autistic spectrum disorder. Good practice in education planning has been recognised. Recommendation 26 states that transition guidance should be built onto the good practice which already exists. Further work is required to ensure that what has been learned from well supported transitions within education (e.g. nursery to primary, primary to secondary) can be adapted to support other 'life stages' transitions.

Finally, we would like to comment on the document itself. It is very comprehensive and laid out in themes and in such a way as to identify what has been done and what has still to be done. The final document may benefit from a different layout with more focus on what needs to be done with timescales and identification of how recommendations are to be implemented. It is important that the multi-disciplinary nature of the document remains. However, some thought might be given to ensuring that there is easy access to guidance and recommendations which refer only to children and young people; only to adults; and to recommendations and guidance which refers to all.

We hope the above comments are helpful.