



Department of Health

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*From the Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP
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Dear Fiona,

Thank you for your letter of 18 September to Jeremy Hunt on behalf of a number of your constituents about the National Autistic Society's (NAS's) campaign on autism diagnosis.

The Department of Health and NHS England agree on the importance of a timely diagnosis of autism. As your constituents know, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines recommend that there should be a maximum of three months between a person's referral and their first appointment for a diagnostic assessment for autism, and we expect the NHS to be meeting these recommendations.

Diagnosis can be complex and involve a number of different professionals and agencies. Some of the waiting times reported in the NAS survey are higher than those reported in data from local authority area autism self-assessment exercises, which are overseen by Public Health England. However, it is clear that some children and adults wait too long to undergo an assessment, and this is something we need to address.

As a first step, the Department of Health and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services will be helping NHS England to examine a sample of clinical commissioning groups to see why some services are following the NICE guidelines and others are not. This will use data from the most recent self-assessment exercise, and aims to share examples of best practice to support more consistent provision.

The Department and NHS England are also considering how to measure the performance of local commissioners in relation to the new arrangements for special educational needs (SEN). We are due to consult on how we set the mandate to NHS

England that will be published after the Government's Spending Review, which is due to end on 25 November.

The Care Quality Commission and Ofsted are consulting on a framework for joint inspections of local areas' support arrangements for children and young people with SEN. This framework should influence commissioners' decisions on the management of capacity constraints that affect the timeliness of autism assessments of children and young people. We are also considering what additional workforce development or other support might help. The consultation document can be found at www.gov.uk, by searching for 'SEND consultation'.

The Department will be working with NAS and other organisations to arrange regional meetings with local authorities and their partners during the autumn and winter to support the implementation of the new autism statutory guidance, which recognises the importance of diagnosis and post-diagnostic support.

The Care Act also places a duty on local authorities to provide or arrange preventative services and support for people within their communities. In discharging this duty, local authorities should ensure they consider the needs of local people with autism. However, any savings will depend on the support people receive, which will be based on their eligibility for social care support. The Department has commissioned University College London to carry out research on the effectiveness of support for people with autism who do not meet the criteria for social care.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours truly

Al.

ALISTAIR BURT