

AN OPEN LETTER TO POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS

15th May 2017

Dear Mrs May, Mr Corbyn, Mr Farron, Ms Lucas, Mr Bartley and Mr Nuttall

We are the frontline workers caring for people on the autism spectrum within a social care system in crisis.

AUTISM TOGETHER, SUPPORTED BY AUTISM SUSSEX, THE NORTH EAST AUTISM SOCIETY, KENT AUTISTIC TRUST AND AUTISM EAST MIDLANDS, CALLS ON YOUR POLITICAL PARTY TO MAKE AUTISM AN URGENT PRIORITY WITHIN ANY SOCIAL CARE REFORM.

A Cordis Bright Viewfinder survey of the social care sector, published in April 2017, found that 77% of autism service providers are struggling financially. Nearly two thirds are stagnating or shrinking. The report authors called this a 'shock to the system.'

Autism is a unique lifelong condition and remains the only disability to have its own act of parliament. But autism-specific care is still not recognised as a highly specialised skill area and therefore not given sufficient funding. Awarding extra money to social care without recognising our specialism will mean we continue to be pitifully underfunded by local authorities, which will continue to ignore our concerns.

To create an autism support worker takes around twenty training courses and a detailed knowledge of how to support complex individuals in physically and mentally challenging circumstances. Approaches must be tailored for specific individuals. The universal support strategies applied to other conditions, such as learning disabilities and Down's syndrome, do not work with autism. This fact is recognised in the very wording of the Autism Act. And yet, despite their skills, many of our fantastic staff are paid so poorly (as we can only pay them what the local authority pays us) that they leave us to work in discount supermarkets, where the hours and pay are better.

WE NEED URGENT ACTION IN FOUR AREAS:

1. PAY US RATES THAT REFLECT OUR COSTS:

The new living wage and sleep in legislation have dramatically impacted our costs and this isn't being accounted for. Colleagues in poorer local authority areas are routinely in deficit. One charity reports a £500,000 increase in costs in 2016/17 yet one of the lowest hourly rates nationally (£13.55 per hour) for supported living. Another is having to subsidise residential services from its supported living income although a charity is not permitted to subsidise a local authority.

2. STOP SLASHING CARE PACKAGES:

Are the days of person-centred care packages behind us? What has happened to structured review meetings involving families? Social workers are now routinely slashing care packages without thorough consultation, ensuring only that the person with autism is 'safe' rather than considering their quality of life.

www.autismtogether.co.uk

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3. WORK WITH US, NOT AGAINST US:

We hear routinely from health workers that 'social care will pay'. We query this with social care and are met with a wall of silence. Both health and social care workers are missing the point: unless we invest in a good quality of life for our clients, hospital admissions will rise and so will long-term costs. One of our colleagues called the behaviour of commissioners 'alarming' - a short-sighted approach leading to long-term catastrophe. By working together we can find more intelligent solutions to funding problems.

4. ALLOW US TO PAY OUR STAFF WHAT THEY'RE WORTH:

Many of our colleagues are finding it extremely challenging to recruit and retain staff. High staff turnovers (the UK average for our sector is 27.5%) mean we struggle to promote managers. Managers and team leaders are essential to nurture junior team members through challenging episodes. Support workers are leaving in droves to work in better paid, lower skilled roles. Some dedicated staff work extra hours for no pay.

We repeat: council tax rises and injections of cash into the social care system alone will not resolve our issues. We need recognition from central and local government (whichever political party that may be) that we are specialist providers with higher costs.

We function now on goodwill and shoestrings and we carry on because failure is unthinkable. Please consider our case.

Yours sincerely



Robin Bush, CEO, Autism Together, on behalf of the staff and supporters of:



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