

Cabinet

13 December 2023

**'Think Autism in County Durham'
Strategy – Update Report**

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

Jane Robinson, Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services

Councillor Ted Henderson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services

Councillor Chris Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet as to progress following the refresh of 'Think Autism in County Durham': Autism Strategy for Children, Young People and Adults into an updated strategy for 2023 – 2026.

Executive Summary

- 2 In September 2018, the Health and Wellbeing Board agreed that there should be a combined all age 'Think Autism in County Durham' Action Plan and an overarching all-age strategy, which was developed by both the Autism Strategy Implementation Group (ASIG) and Children and Young People Autism Steering groups. These two strategic groups were then combined into one overarching Autism Steering Group.
- 3 Think Autism in County Durham: Autism Strategy for Children, Young People and Adults 2018/19 – 2020/21 was presented to Durham County Council's Cabinet on 3 April 2019 then launched soon after in April 2019 during Autism Awareness week. It was the first all age autism strategy in County Durham.

- 4 The COVID Pandemic affected progress against the aims of this strategy and also caused extra stress and anxiety for many autistic people who struggled with the constant changing of rules and restrictions to help manage the control of the virus. As life began to return to normal following the lifting of many COVID restrictions, the priorities of the strategy were revisited, and six new workgroups were created to look at key areas.
- 5 The National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults 2021 to 2026 was published in July 2021, building on the previous Think Autism Strategy. Whilst much of the County Durham 2019 Strategy was reflected in this, the refreshed Think Autism in County Durham 2023-26 is completely aligned with the more recent all age national strategy, and workgroups are being refreshed in accordance with this.
- 6 One example of this is the increased focus in the national strategy on criminal justice, which it was felt did not feature as prominently in the County Durham strategy.

Recommendation(s)

- 7 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) agree the findings of this report and the updated strategy, and;
 - (b) support communications and awareness raising as part of National Autism Awareness Week in Spring 2024.

Background

- 8 In September 2018, the Health and Wellbeing Board agreed that there should be a combined all age 'Think Autism in County Durham' Action Plan and an overarching all-age strategy for 2018-20. This was developed by both the Autism Strategy Implementation Group (ASIG) and Children and Young People Autism Steering groups, which were later amalgamated into one Autism Steering Group.
- 9 A new joint strategic approach was developed through partnership working with adult and health services and children and young people's services, which was later endorsed by Cabinet in April 2019. National Autism Awareness Week (2nd – 7th April 2019) saw partners across County Durham raising awareness with a focus on the following aims:
 - The needs of people on the autism spectrum are known and understood;
 - The workforce understands and meets the needs of people on the autism spectrum;
 - People on the autism spectrum participate equally within their community.
- 10 The all-age joint strategy was formally launched at an event at County Hall on the 5th of April 2019, involving Elected Members and including a presentation event, information stalls and celebration activities.
- 11 This was received extremely well from a number of partners, autistic people, and their families. The event was co-produced in partnership and feedback confirmed unanimously that this felt like a shared partnership approach.
- 12 The COVID Pandemic affected progress against the aims of this strategy and also caused extra stress and anxiety for many autistic people who struggled with the constant changing of rules and restrictions to help manage the control of the virus. As life began to return to normal following the lifting of many COVID restrictions the priorities of the strategy were revisited and six new workgroups were created to look at key areas:
 - Workforce Development;
 - Community Inclusion;
 - Employability;
 - Education;
 - Assessment of need;

- Support for autistic adults and their families.
- 13 The National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults 2021 to 2026 was published in July 2021, building on the previous Think Autism Strategy. Whilst much of the County Durham 2019 Strategy was reflected in this, the refreshed Think Autism in County Durham 2023-26 is completely aligned with the more recent all age national strategy, and workgroups are being refreshed to support this.
 - 14 One example of this is the increased focus in the national strategy on criminal and youth justice which it was felt did not feature as prominently in the County Durham strategy. The local strategy also links with the Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust Autism Strategy and Framework.

Current Position

- 15 The Autism Steering Group has been reviewing the strategy over the last year with each of the individual workgroups looking at both their specific area and the strategy overall to contribute to discussions. A survey was also sent to a wide range of stakeholders. Although the response rate was low, the steering group and working groups have included the voice of the autistic person and family carers throughout the development of the strategy.
- 16 The updated strategy went to the Health and Wellbeing Board on 25 September 2023 and is attached as appendix 2 along with a short presentation, which covers some key points as appendix 3.
- 17 The amended vision of the Steering Group is that “in County Durham all autistic people live fulfilling and rewarding lives within a society that accepts and understands them. They can access advice and support if they need it, and they can depend on mainstream public services to treat them fairly as individuals, helping them make the most of their talents.”
- 18 This will be achieved by helping autistic people in County Durham:
 - Be an equal part of their local community;
 - Get the right advice and support at the right time throughout their lifetime;
 - Develop their skills and independence and work to the best of their ability;
 - Have good mental and physical health.

- 19 There are six aims of the refreshed strategy to try and achieve this vision:
- (a) Autistic people and their families are able to access the right information, advice, and support at the right time;
 - (b) Autistic people have good physical and mental health, which is supported by staff and organisations who have an improved understanding and knowledge of autism and access to appropriate advice and support;
 - (c) Autistic people have better access to education, including further and higher education and life-long learning, with autistic young people receiving support to make positive transitions into adulthood;
 - (d) Autistic people and employers have good advice and support to access, maintain and progress in employment;
 - (e) Autistic people live and participate equally within their community and, when necessary, receive high quality care and support to maintain that community living;
 - (f) Autistic people's experiences of both the criminal and youth justice systems are improved by ensuring that all staff understand autism and how to support autistic people.

Next Steps

- 20 The membership of the workgroups will be refreshed with a particular focus on trying to ensure that the views of autistic people are heard.
- 21 Each workgroup will then focus on their particular aim and feedback to the Autism Steering Group on progress, with regular meetings of the leads of each group to consider cross-cutting themes such as workforce development.
- 22 Progress against each aim will be monitored and feedback provided to management groups, ultimately resulting in a new strategy in 2026 which clearly shows progress made as well as identifying new priorities at that time.
- 23 The intention is that a task and finish group will plan for the launch of the new strategy which will take place during an event held in Autism Awareness week, between 1 to 7 April 2024.

Conclusion

- 24 The Autism Steering Group will be responsible for the implementation of this strategy and will co-ordinate the tasks of the individual workgroups

with an aim of improving the lives of autistic people, and their families, in County Durham.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

No implications.

Finance

Due to increased demand in support services for autistic people, further funding may be required, yet to be identified. For 2023/24 additional funding has been identified through the Learning Disability and Mental Health Partnership and Hospital Discharge funding to improve/expand community services specifically for autistic adults.

Consultation

No implications.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

The strategy seeks to improve help, support and inclusion for autistic people and their families.

Climate Change

No implications.

Human Rights

No implications.

Crime and Disorder

It is hoped that by improving the services available to autistic people that offending and re-offending will reduce.

Staffing

No Implications.

Accommodation

None highlighted.

Risk

There is a risk that an opportunity is missed to improve services by working more collaboratively.

Procurement

Separate approval would be required for any new contract/service which may be identified as a need by Autism Steering Group. For example, the Post Diagnostic Support Service for autistic people (not eligible for social care) currently provided by MAIN will undergo a review and procurement in 2023/24.

Disability issues

No implications – the strategy seeks to improve services and support for autistic people including those with disabilities.

Appendix 2: Think Autism in County Durham Strategy for Children, Young People & Adults– 2023-2026

Attached as a separate document.

Appendix 3: Powerpoint summary of the Autism Strategy for County Durham

Attached as a separate document.