



Northern Ireland Assembly Autism Bill

Response from the College of Occupational Therapists

Introduction

The College of Occupational Therapists (COT) is pleased to provide a submission to the Committee for Health, Social services and Public Safety about the proposed Autism Bill. The College of Occupational Therapists is the professional body for occupational therapists and represents over 28,000 occupational therapists, support workers and students from across the United Kingdom. Occupational therapists work in the NHS, Local Authority social care services, housing, schools, prisons, voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

Occupational therapists are regulated by the Health Professions Council, and work with people of all ages with a wide range of occupational problems resulting from physical, mental, social or developmental difficulties.

The philosophy of occupational therapy is founded on the concept that occupation is essential to human existence and good health and wellbeing. Occupation includes all the things that people do or participate in. For example, caring for themselves and others, working, learning, playing and interacting with others. Being deprived of or having limited access to occupation can affect physical and psychological health.

Amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The COT would like to clarify that the proposed route for introducing the Bill via an amendment to current legislation has been based on what is best for people with autism rather than what may be the easiest method of introduction for the Department.

Autism strategy

The COT is in agreement about the need to prepare a strategy on autism that will be fully consulted on. This consultation should include all stakeholder groups who will be involved in the delivery and monitoring of the strategy including professional groups, individuals with autism, families and carers. The COT supports the idea that every HSC trust must provide data on the prevalence of autism in its area and that progress towards the strategy should be reported on every three years by the Department.



Content of the autism strategy

The COT would like confirmation that this strategy is intended to cover adults only. The COT would also like to check that the proposed needs that will be covered such as the “health, educational and social needs of persons with autism” will also include the following:

- The key occupational areas of people with autism’s lives: self care activities including the ability to look after oneself and home, employment activities or the main productive role by which one contributes to society and leisure activities. This type of assessment can be carried out by occupational therapists. Occupational therapists can also assess the need for suitable living environments which would involve an assessment of the person’s occupational performance (what the person can do), desired goals and communication needs.
- An in-depth, specific sensory assessment carried out by an occupational therapist. A sensory assessment will include asking questions about how the person reacts to sound (e.g. do they stay away from noisy settings), smell (e.g. do they particularly like strong smells like washing powder), taste (e.g. do they particularly like/dislike strong tastes), sight (e.g. do they prefer the curtains closed on a sunny day), movement (e.g. do they like swaying or rocking) and touch (e.g. do they twist their own hair). This information often helps family members or support staff learn how to adjust the environment to facilitate an individual’s goal orientated activity.

We would therefore like to suggest the additional wording of “Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1) the needs to be set out in the autism strategy shall include the health care, **occupational, sensory**, educational and social needs of persons with autism”.

The COT believe that this autism strategy should aim to enable people with autism to have a socially included, ordinary life with access to the same opportunities that most people take for granted such as a home of one’s own, relationships, employment and leisure time.
