



Mr. John Swinney MSP
First Minister
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Sent: firstminister@gov.scot

8th August 2024

Dear First Minister,

Re: *Including the Learning Disability, Autism, and Neurodivergence Bill in the Programme for Government 2024*

As the Autism Campaigner's Group of the National Autistic Society Scotland, we would like to see the Learning Disability, Autism, and Neurodivergence Bill be included in this year's Programme for Government.

The National Autistic Society Scotland is a leading charity for autistic people and their families, and we provide local specialist help, information and care across Scotland. The Autistic Campaigners Group was established in 2023 and aims to drive positive change by campaigning for greater acceptance and inclusion of autistic people in Scotland. Our group is comprised of 11 autistic adults and, together, we have a broad range of experience regarding what it is like to be autistic in Scotland.

We believe that the Learning Disability, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill, once introduced, will lead to many positive changes that have been long sought after. The severity of some of the harms caused to autistic people as a result of inadequate support and understanding means that the Bill must be introduced sooner rather than later. The Autistic Campaigner's Group, therefore, urge you to include the LDAN Bill in this year's Programme for Government. Our reasoning for this is outlined below.

Awareness and understanding

Across many sectors including education, work, and health, there remains a significant lack of awareness of autism. Many people maintain an understanding of autism that is a mere stereotype of what it actually means to be autistic. Sadly, this is a major reason why many autistic people feel isolated, excluded, and unable to fully participate in society. This, in turn, is having a significant effect on autistic people's mental health which cannot be ignored any longer.

Through the LDAN Bill, we believe the Scottish Government can create a greater understanding of autism within our public services and across the general population.

Being left behind

Society makes it much harder for autistic people to achieve their potential than those who are neurotypical. For instance, 71% of autistic adults are unemployed and this figure is thought to be much worse in Scotland where employment rates for autistic people could be as low as 16%. In fact, many aspects of employment are not inclusive of autistic people, from the application process to workplace adjustments.

Furthermore, autistic people in the UK are recorded as having a lower life expectancy than non-autistic people. For autistic men and women, the average life expectancy is 74.6 and 76.8 years respectively, which is lower than the average for the general population which sits at 80 and 83 years for men and women respectively. These figures are even lower for autistic adults with a learning disability. While research into the causes of this disparity are ongoing, health inequalities are thought to play a significant role.

The LDAN Bill is essential if autistic people's life experiences are to improve. It's for this reason that we also want 'autism' and 'autistic people' to be explicitly referenced on the face of the Bill. We were disappointed that the consultation only referred to 'neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities'. While some of us identify as neurodivergent and we acknowledge the benefits of a neuro-affirmative approach, some of us identify as autistic and we all recognise the need and value of autism specific training and support.

The need for a commissioner

We would further like to stress the benefits of a commissioner for autistic people. Accountability regarding issues facing autistic people, people with learning disabilities, and those who are neurodivergent, has been sorely lacking over the years. A Commissioner for autistic people will introduce greater accountability in our public sector, ensure that autistic people's rights are respected in a wide range of settings across Scotland, and promote greater understanding of autism in the general population.

While alternative options may be being considered by the Scottish Government, we fear that any other option would not amount to the same level of accountability that a Commissioner could provide autistic people, their families, and professionals.

Scotland on the world stage

We hope you agree that Scotland should be a place where no one is left behind. It should be a country where difference is celebrated and a place where everybody is supported, encouraged, and their talents recognised. By including the LDAN Bill in the Programme for Government, the Scottish Government would reaffirm its commitment to improving the lives of autistic people and take a step towards making Scotland a fairer and more equitable society. It is a unique opportunity for Scotland to show that it is one of the leading countries in the world when it comes to protecting the rights of autistic people.

If the LDAN Bill is introduced this year, we hope that MSPs from all parties can agree on its importance and work together to make it as effective as possible. Indeed, we hope you will agree that the inclusion of autistic people, neurodivergent people and those with learning disabilities in our society is a cross-party issue, which requires cross-party collaboration.

We hope you will consider the contents of this letter and include the Learning Disability, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill in the Programme for Government this September. Doing so would give hope to those impacted by the Bill, signalling to them that their voices have and will be heard. As autistic people, it would mean that we can face the future with more hope and positivity.

We look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Autistic Campaigner's Group,
National Autistic Society Scotland