



## Joint Committee on Autism: 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

### Submission from the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists.

Good morning,

My name is Áine Lawlor and I am here with Maria Gleeson, on behalf of the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists, the recognised professional association of Speech & Language Therapists in Ireland. We would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak with the committee today.

Speech & Language Therapists work with autistic people across a range of settings. The IASLT is a committed advocate for people with communication and feeding support needs, ensuring that their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights for People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) are promoted and protected so that all people with a disability, including autistic children, young people and adults, get the support they need to thrive and to live happy and full lives. IASLT welcomes this week's publication of the Committee's report on Aligning Disability Services with the UNCRPD and the references from IASLT's submission to the Committee on Disability. In IASLT's submission in October 2022 we raised a number of issues some of which are reflected in today's submission.

We strongly advocate for the use of a Neurodiversity-Affirmative paradigm as the overarching prism through which disability, in particular for today's submission, Autism, is viewed, discussed, and supported. We recognise that there are lots of



different and valid ways of experiencing the world and that there is great strength and power in a neurodiverse human population. The neurodiversity paradigm affirms that all neurotypes have unique strengths and needs which are deserving of consideration and respect, with support needs varying from person to person. As a society we must value people for who they are and work towards the full inclusion of people with disabilities.

Communication is a fundamental human right that is central to human interaction and participation. Communication support is a crucial element in the implementation of many articles in the UNCRPD. As a society, we have a responsibility to ensure that all autistic people have access to appropriate communication supports to ensure that they can access education, healthcare, employment and community activities.

It is crucial to recognise the diverse communication needs of autistic people and to provide appropriate accommodations to support autistic people to fully participate in all aspects of society. The IASLT advocates for the development of Speech and Language Therapy services outside of traditional health services and the outcomes from projects such as Therapy in Schools, continue to highlight the need for Speech and Language Therapists in education, mental health services as well as primary care/ disability services.

Speech & Language Therapists have a unique role in assessing and supporting the communication needs of autistic people and in understanding the broader communication barriers impacting autistic people in all aspects of Irish society. As health and social care professionals we also work closely with parents, carers and other professionals, including teachers, nurses, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

One of the areas named specifically in the UNCRPD is the support of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). The term AAC is often used to refer to high tech speech generating devices but the true meaning of the term is more expansive.



An AAC system also can include things like gesture or sign; paper based tools, for example alphabet boards and phones or devices specifically designed for communication.

As Speech & Language Therapists we advocate for the use of robust AAC Communication systems. Many users of AAC require a Total Communication Approach which includes a combination of tools to support their communication across home, school, social situations. Robust AAC systems require tailoring to the individual and their communication needs, while allowing for evolution in their needs over time. Autistic people in Ireland do not have equitable access to Speech & Language Therapy supports and funding pathways to help them access robust communication systems.

Recruitment and retention are challenging for the health service at this time. There has been investment in posts, which is welcomed. The reconfiguration of Children's disability services under the Progressing Disabilities services for children and young people model, has resulted in increased challenges for staff working in this environment which must be acknowledged, with SLTs raising clinical concerns, an increase in complaints related to changes in work practices and a significant amount of clinician's time and expertise being spent on non clinical demands. In order to support recruitment and retention of staff the culture and issues of clinical governance need to be addressed so staff are practicing in a safe environment and have appropriate support. Clinical governance frameworks should be developed and implemented consistently across the country to provide clinical assurance, accountability and the development of service pathways, policies and clinical competency documents in relation to Autism service provision.

The reorganisation of services under Progressing Disabilities has removed access for some resulting in inequitable access to required specialist services. Publishing and implementation of promised policies to support PDS is imperative. In the absence of these documents and their implementation there are inconsistencies and



inequity in service provision for children and their families. This is impacting on the safe and effective provision of services and further creating challenging work environments for staff. The issue of pay and conditions for staff in the HSE and in particular Section 39 organisations is also impacting on recruitment.

Access to timely identification and intervention for autistic children, young people and adults is vital to ensure that their needs are understood and that they have access to appropriate support to ensure they lead a full life.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Waiting times for Speech and Language therapy and other team supports are a critical issue. Addressing recruitment and retention issues in Speech & Language therapy is crucial and we advocate for a comprehensive workforce plan.
2. Specialist Pathways were to be established as part of the roll out of Progressing Disability Services. These services were previously provided by specific client cohort focused services, or agencies that had staff skilled in these areas who could provide the relevant supervision, support and training. Reconfiguration dismantled this structure. The promised specialist supports have not been consistently developed and in some cases there is no local access to specialist support for autistic people. New pathways to access specialist support are required.
3. Clinical Specialist Speech and Language therapy posts are required nationally., given the multiplicity of expertise required, for example in swallowing or AAC and with consideration of the complex presentations which require specialist support.
4. A national framework for prescribing and funding of communication devices is required. We need a system that allows rapid access, including a loan model so that people can quickly access and try out different devices, to ensure that they get the best system for their needs.



5. Development of an assessment and intervention service for autistic adults, who do not have an intellectual disability and currently do not have access to autistic support services.
6. Training and support to education staff (across primary, post primary, vocational training, rehabilitative training, third level institutions etc) to ensure that reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided. Support is required to ensure education is delivered in the most appropriate modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximise academic and social development.
7. Training for health professionals, educators, public representatives (e.g. Gardai, judges, TUSLA) in relation to neurodiversity concepts and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication.

As a society we have come a long way in the public awareness of autism. However, we must continue to foster collaboration across all sectors of society to promote and protect the human rights of people with a disability, including autistic people within our society. We must ensure that the services and supports we provide are accessible and are Neurodiverse-Affirmative in their content. We must also address the gaps in services and supports. These gaps have been highlighted for children and their families trying to access intervention and significant gaps also exist for adults, with services often ceasing when a young person turns 18. The significance of the change required to disability services is acknowledged, however to rebuild trust with service users and clinicians, it is imperative that there are appropriate targets and follow through on promised strategies and actions.

We look forward to working with Government parties to ensure the implementation of recommendations from the report on Aligning Disability Services with the UNCRPD as we work towards improving services for people with a disability.



