Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives: the strategy for autism

Briefing for the Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee – November 2011

1. Purpose of the report

To inform the Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee of the current position and developments against the national strategy for autism, ‘Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives’.

2. Background

The Autism Act 2009 committed the Government to publishing an adult autism strategy to transform services for adults with autism. ‘Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives’ was launched in March 2010 with a Delivery Plan in April 2010. These documents set out a number of key actions and recommendations for central government, local Authorities and the NHS. The focus was on five key areas:

- Increasing awareness and understanding of autism
- Developing a clear and consistent pathway for diagnosis
- Improving access to the services and support they need to live independently in the community
- Helping adults with autism into work
- Enabling local partners to plan and develop relevant services to meet identified needs and priorities.

Further guidance followed in December 2010 and then additional tools were published in April 2011 to monitor progress on the implementation of the Adult Autism Strategy. These included an ‘Essential Quality Outcomes for Local Self-Assessment Framework and a series of online training resources. Within the framework the Government identified seven quality outcomes and three key service ambitions:

- Local Authorities and partners know how many adults with autism live in the area
- A clear and trusted diagnostic pathway is available locally
- Health and Social Care staff make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of adults with autism.

Staffordshire has jointly used the framework with Stoke on Trent and in September 2011 shared a joint formal response with the West Midlands Regional Network of Autism Leads.

3. Where are we now in Staffordshire

We want to make the vision a reality for people with autism across the entire spectrum. The following sections outline the work which has been completed to date and the action still required against the five specific areas within the strategy as set out above.
3.1 Increasing awareness and understanding of autism among frontline professionals

Many people need to understand autism better: employers, welfare benefits workers, people in the criminal justice system, front line social workers and health professionals.

Dr Juli Crocombe, Consultant Psychiatrist, South Staffordshire and Shropshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust is leading a recently established training sub group of the Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Adult Autism Partnership Board. Representatives from Staffordshire County Council, third sector and the two Mental Health and Learning Disability trusts are part of the group. A training strategy and implementation plan will be developed for public sector front line staff.

3.2 Developing a clear and consistent pathway for diagnosis in every area

The forthcoming National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) guideline will set out a model care pathway, which will form the foundation for local commissioners to develop referral and care pathways in their areas.

In May 2011, a workshop involving health and social care staff, family carers, people on the autistic spectrum and third sector representatives was held to start and scope the pathway development locally. A sub group of the Partnership Board with senior clinical staff has now been established to take the work programme forward.

We need to ensure there are better systems for recording autism as a co-morbidity to enable the collection of more accurate data for future planning and provision.

3.3 Improving access to the services and support they need to live independently in the community

There are a number of local support groups across the county including Jigsaw in South Staffordshire, Lifeworks, North Staffs Asperger and Autism Association (NSAAA) and Staffordshire Adult Autistic Society (SAAS) who offer a very valuable and appreciated service for people on the autistic spectrum.

We are developing an outline proposal for presentation to the Care and Independence Board to establish a small virtual team to provide a low level early intervention and prevention support service.

We have recently established an Expert Carers Reference Group to enable enhanced participation of carers into the Staffordshire work programme on autism. The aim of the group is to give a voice and ensure active involvement to carers in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services for people with autism in Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent.

3.4 Helping adults with autism into work

The national strategy sets out some clear recommendations on helping adults with autism into work. A representative from Job Centre Plus attends the Staffordshire
and Stoke on Trent Autism Partnership Board. There are a number of good practice examples within the county where local employment services support adults with autism including Oak Tree Trust, Lifeworks, the Princes Trust, Shaw Trust and Remploy. We need to continue to ensure there are more opportunities to access employment and easier pathways. Staffordshire is developing an Employment Strategy.

3.5 Enabling local partners to plan and develop appropriate services for adults with autism to meet identified needs and priorities

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent have established an active Autism Partnership Board with representatives from local statutory agencies including commissioners from Telford & Wrekin, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent, people with autism and family carers. Lead Commissioners have been appointed by the Councils to progress and oversee the work programme locally.

A draft Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Adult Autism Strategy and implementation plan has been written and will be consulted on formally in the near future pending further revision with the Expert Carers Reference Group.

The Staffordshire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment is being refreshed and will include updated data on the numbers of adults with autism. This will support local commissioning plans.

A protocol for referrals and transfers between teams, services and trusts has been developed by the County Council.

4. Conclusion

There are a number of key recommendations and practical implications in the national strategy which Staffordshire has embraced and commenced implementation. Locally, there are examples of good practice and the foundations are in place to go forward with a focus on improving services for adults with autism.

There is a significant work programme ahead and one of the key priorities for 2012/2013 is to develop a care pathway in line with NICE guidelines. Involvement of people on the autistic spectrum and their family carers in developing the local strategy is paramount and will continue to be sustained.

The work being led by the Commissioners from Staffordshire through the Autism Partnership Board provides assurance on the preparation being undertaken to meet the requirements of the Autism Act.

Christine Adams
Commissioning Manager, Learning Disabilities
3 November 2011