

Dear

I am aware that the diagnostic service for autism is part of the CAMHS neurodevelopmental service in our area and that there is currently a proposal to restrict eligibility for children requiring an autism diagnosis to only those children who have an existing mental health condition.

I am writing to you because I have serious concerns about these proposals and the impact they would have on children requiring an assessment and potential diagnosis.

As a parent of a child with autism, I know how essential an autism diagnosis is, both for my child and for our wider family. A diagnosis is also crucial to getting the right care and support at school and at home. It seems to me that to restrict referrals for autism diagnostic assessments to just those children with existing mental health problems would also be discriminatory under the Equality Act.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability and is not a mental health condition. Every area must offer at least the opportunity for a child suspected of being autistic, to be assessed. If the CAMHS service no longer have the capacity to provide assessments and diagnoses for autism then an alternative diagnostic service must be considered. It is unacceptable that if a child is struggling and having difficulties suspected to be related to autism, that they would be unable to get a diagnosis and support for their condition.

In fact, there is evidence that autistic children (undiagnosed as well as diagnosed) are at higher risk of developing mental health problems precisely because they often have not received the proper support for their autism. Therefore, diagnosing only those who already have a mental health problem is a false economy. For children who do not have mental health problems but are suspected of having autism it is crucial to get them diagnosed as soon as possible. The diagnosis is a gateway to other services and support, not just in education but also for their social and communication skills and for the wider family.

The following extract is taken from the National Autistic Society's 'Great Expectations' report and highlights the negative impact and longer-term costs associated with children not being given a timely diagnosis:

“For children, a lack of diagnosis means that children with autism are not referred to appropriate support, both in and out of school. Our research has found that the consequent lack of support can have a profound effect on children’s lives. Seven in ten parents told us that their child’s education progress suffered because of a lack of timely support. Nearly half said that there has been a strong negative impact on their child’s progress. Critically for children with autism, three quarters of parents say that a lack of support has harmed their child’s social and communication skills.^[1] “

With all these points in mind, we urge you to reconsider your plans and to continue to provide an essential service for future children in need of support.

Yours sincerely,

^[1] Reid (2011), *Great Expectations*. National Autistic Society.