

Response to the Evaluation of the Scottish Strategy for Autism 2011-2021 report

Autism Network Scotland



Background

The commissioned evaluation of the Scottish Strategy for Autism was published in September 2021,

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-scottish-strategy-autism/>

Although no opportunity has been given to organisations referred to in the evaluation to respond or comment, Autism Network Scotland (ANS) has produced this report to add further information and insight.

This is from the perspective of an organisation that was integral to the delivery of many of the successful elements of the strategy and yet is the only organisation to have its funding withdrawn, based on unsubstantiated allegations of poor practice, not delivering outcomes and no longer being required.

Key themes

The evaluation report rightly reflects on the challenges faced by the strategy and key themes and main outcomes.

1. Diagnosis

Improving diagnosis has been a theme of the strategy from the beginning and a significant amount of the funding has been allocated to address improving the diagnostic experience, including the creation of a new team/service (National Autistic Improvement Team). Despite this, at ANS we continue to hear of very long waiting lists and poor diagnostic experiences in many areas.

There has been progress in some areas due to local initiatives and action, however the national picture remains poor with a waiting time for diagnosis of 2 years not uncommon.

Diagnosis continues to be a main priority within the Towards Transformation plan. Therefore the conclusion has to be that the strategy has been ineffective in dealing with diagnosis and it is time to take a more radical and innovative approach.

2. Awareness

Many autistic people have often commented that the one thing that would make the biggest difference in their lives would be more understanding of autism in the general public, the people they meet in their everyday lives. ANS welcomes the priority given to raising public understanding although significant funding around this was only available in the final phase of the strategy (2018-21).

3. Resources

The report refers to a number of national resources that were created as a direct or indirect result of the strategy. (Mapping project, Menu of Interventions, Autism Toolbox, Micro-segmentation report). Whilst all these are valuable sources of information, ANS has seen relatively little use of such resources in local areas. Perhaps future use of such resources would benefit from a stronger more local involvement in their commissioning, creation and dissemination and clear responsibility for their continued distribution and uptake.

Autism Network Scotland

ANS has been based at the University of Strathclyde for the last 14 years, and for the duration of the autism strategy has been commissioned by the Scottish Government to support the delivery of certain aspects of the strategy. These activities have evolved over the years and in alignment with an annual work plan as set by the Scottish Government.

The table below illustrates key points from the report’s executive summary where ANS has been involved.

Executive Summary

Theme/Findings	Reference	ANS
Increased engagement with autistic people was carried out...	iii para 2	Throughout the strategy ANS supported the engagement of autistic people. ANS has the voice of lived experience as an integral part of our activities.
Improved cross -agency working...	iii para 3	Core to ANS’s approach is the development and support to partnership working. ANS has developed successful partnerships with partners in business, health, social work, academia, education and the voluntary sector. To end these existing and positive partnerships is short-sighted and will have to be reformed.
Funding for distance learning courses...	iii para 5	ANS was instrumental in disseminating the information about these opportunities and thus the success of these. The Network played a crucial role in the success of Open University autism initiatives. Since the course launch in September 2018, total course enrolments worldwide have exceeded 70,000. The number of enrolments in Scotland is currently estimated to be around 7,700, which, in terms of population, is a relatively high proportion for a UK nation. Ilona Roth, Honorary Associate, School of

		Life, Health and Chemical Sciences, The Open University said, "I am greatly indebted to ANS for their important contributions to the success of this OU programme of autism-related work".
The Scottish Government created the National Autistic Improvement Team (NAIT) to provide support around ... employment, in response to diagnosis.	iv para 2	ANS has facilitated the Autism and Employability Network (referred to later) for several years but which was not contacted by NAIT regarding knowledge exchange opportunities. Attempts to involve NAIT in the employment network were not successful.
ANS produced a report exploring what needs to be done to better support parents...	iv para 4	This report was carried out and submitted to the Scottish Government as requested with a number of recommendations. No action has been taken. ANS is now independently developing a national network for parent and family support groups.
... objectives around autism and ageing... pilot project in 3 areas	v para 7	The pilot project has been very successful and well received. ANS is in a position to roll this out depending on funding. One of the ANS team is now undertaking advanced research into autism and dementia.
ANS have supported several organisations in their drive to become more autism friendly...	vi para 1	Glasgow City Council won an award for their autism awareness campaign that ANS developed and initiated. ANS still receives requests for support with organisational strategies (voluntary and local authority). This is an impactful and unique resources which is based on the experience ANS has gained.
Housing and Homelessness...	vi para 2	This report was carried out and submitted to Scottish Government as requested. No further action has been taken. ANS has independently re-started discussions to raise the issues highlighted in the report.
Barriers to employment... ANS facilitated Autism and Employability Group..	vi para 5	The evaluation makes references to the ANS Employability and Autism Network. This network has been an opportunity to bring together projects that work in this area for mutual support, sharing and identifying priorities. Priorities for action in this area were regularly shared with the Scottish Government. Members are

		committed to the value in continuing this network facilitated by ANS.
Skills and expertise in organisations such as ANS... helped to...	viii para 2	The evaluation has recognised the value of ANS and comments on it's positive impact on local services. This contradicts with the Scottish Governments view about the lack of need for ANS.
Training...was an area of improvement...	ix para 2	Although not commissioned by Scottish Government to be a main deliverer of training, ANS's bespoke training programmes have been impactful and valued by the organisations it has worked in partnership with. (e.g. ANS provided key support and personnel in the development of the on-line NES e-module training package.)
... varying levels of mistrust and exasperation...	x para 5	ANS has built positive partnerships across the sector and is viewed as a trustworthy and proactive ally. It therefore seems sensible to build on this to help address this mistrust.
Sharing local good practice...	xi para 4	Throughout the strategy ANS has coordinated national and local events to share good practice and is in the best position to continue with this.
After 10 years, there is an increased understanding and knowledge about what needs to change and what works...	xiii para 2	ANS has been involved in most of the actions where the strategy has made progress. Therefore it would seem sensible to continue with something that is working.

Summary of the evaluation

The evaluation summary contains recommendations for future policy. Recommendations for the future are to narrow the focus of work so there is more likelihood of effective delivery and sustainability. ANS welcomes this call for more focus. This reflects on the piecemeal 10 year strategy, in its ambitious societal aims and it's vague management and delivery over the last few years.

In addition it shows there is a clear role for ANS as the organisation that is still best placed to lead on the delivery in a number of these recommendations.

Recommended focus	ANS response
<i>Provide clarity about actions and implementation</i>	
Explore what evidence or data could be routinely collected to inform the local and national picture	As an independent organisation with a Scotland wide network, ANS is well placed to assist in gathering local insights and data.
<i>Provide clarity on where autism sits within government policy</i>	
Consider focusing on areas that need to see the greatest change – diagnosis, transitions, support for autistic adults, employment	ANS has worked extensively in the areas of transitions, support for adults and employment and will continue to do this.
Place stronger requirements on local authorities to deliver	ANS has a partnership with local authorities and through the autism lead officers group we can support local authorities to deliver the best outcomes for autistic people.
Review who is contributing to the discussions and influencing policy; and build on the positive relationships that exist.	ANS has established relationships across Scotland which can be used to support contributions across the sector.

Discussions and Conclusions

Within the discussion and conclusions section of the report there are a number of areas that link directly with ANS, the work it has delivered and the nature of its structure, priorities and approach.

1. Factors that influenced implementation of the strategy at a local level

The report reflects the challenges faced by delivery at a local level. It refers to the value of resources that were available to local authorities:

‘There were also resources that local areas could access, from ANS facilitated leads network... The engagement with and use of these valuable resources varied from area to area.’ (44 para 3)

2. Engagement and partnership working

The evaluation rightly highlights the benefits and importance of working in partnerships.

'...the successful delivery of projects and services that meet the needs of autistic people was best achieved through collaboration and partnership working at a local and national level and with statutory and third sector organisations...' (46 para 2)

The benefit and need of partnership working is a key finding and ANS is uniquely placed to use the partnerships it has developed over the last 14 years

3. Influence of policy

The report comments on the *'crowded, yet fragmented autism landscape of third sector organisations'*. ANS has always been particularly valued by small and local third sector organisations rather than the larger *'usual suspects'* who would usually regard themselves as not requiring the type of networks that ANS can offer.

ANS has fostered good working partnerships across the autism landscape and is the only organisation with this breadth of positive partnerships and contacts. It would be a significant backward step to lose this and the potential this has to bring organisations and individuals together where possible, identifying synergies and sharing knowledge.

4. Sharing local good practice

The evaluation reports that participants in workshops and surveys: *'acknowledged that the local autism leads network facilitated by ANS, supported local government and HCP partnerships... but participants from local third sector organisations said they have no platform to do so'*. (48 para 6)

ANS continues to prioritise the Autism Lead Officers network as it is highly valued by members and offers great opportunities for sharing knowledge and practice. ANS, as the only cross Scotland independent networking organisation also plans to re-establish a similar national network for third sector providers collaborative.

5. Persistent shortcomings in particular service delivery and support

Most of the areas identified in this section (49) are where ANS has the potential and capacity to assist in making progress in the future based on skills, knowledge and previous activity.

For example:

- ANS continues to work with ARC Scotland in the delivery of training around their transitions work.
- ANS continues to support employability solutions through its Project Search work at the University of Strathclyde and the Autism and Employability network.
- ANS is developing a national Autism Parents Network.

6. Conclusion

The report ends with a clear statement about the importance of partnerships and collaboration: *'This can only be achieved in true partnerships with autistic people and collaboration across services and sectors'* (54 para 2)

Again ANS is the organisation that is best placed to make meaningful, non-tokenistic progress in bringing together the disparate and varied partners.

Further observations

Evaluation process

ANS acted as facilitators to the workshops and did not influence the evaluation. However, we were able to listen to the viewpoints of all participants. In particular ANS witnessed many comments about the benefits of local strategies and their implementation. Also the frequency of concerns about diagnosis, local facilities being withdrawn.

ANS also supported the roll out of the evaluation survey through our online networks. (ANS has a network reach of over 6,000 contacts)

ANS delivery

The evaluation report comments that ANS has 'helped to build capacity and expertise' and acknowledges where ANS has had an active role in specific activity. There are no negative references on which to base the Scottish Government's decision to single out ANS to cease funding. Therefore the assumption has to be made that this decision is not based on performance or the lack of need for a central, independent network working throughout Scotland across sectors, sharing best practice, knowledge and facilitating partnerships at all levels.

Attribution

In evaluating a strategy of this duration and analysing the activity and changes that have taken place during this period, you have to also consider what actions, if any, would have happened irrespective of the strategy being in place. Particularly when people are asked generically 'what has changed for you?' without being given clarity of what actions may have come directly or indirectly from the strategy.

Thus this evaluation does include reference to some things that may have happened irrespective of the strategy. For example the general move towards increasing representation from autistic people and more specific actions such as the Guide to Employment Policies.

Reports commissioned

The evaluation refers to a number of reports that were commissioned by the Scottish Government as part of strategy activities and priorities. (Homelessness, Ageing, Advocacy).

With the exception of the report on Autism and Ageing, the Scottish Government has not followed up on these reports with ANS or responded to any of recommendations within them.

Final comment

ANS has been involved in the National Autism Strategy from the beginning and has carefully considered the evaluation report. Although the funding committed to the evaluation was reduced during the tender process, the report does provide a good overview of the strategy, activity and impact that has been achieved as well as outcomes which have failed to be fully addressed. The evaluators worked as best as they could within their available resources and the process as prescribed by Scottish Government. Therefore it is not unexpected that there are some shortcomings in the depth in which the report explores where progress has been made and the reasons behind that.

As the report understandably is limited to the timescale of the strategy, it does not address the transition into the Towards Transformation plan or priorities that have been set or funding decisions that have been made.

Specifically whilst the report reflects on the effectiveness of ANS in the activities it was commissioned to deliver, it does not then comment on the Scottish Government's decision to cease funding to ANS but continues to fund other key delivery partners.

Autism Network Scotland
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