

## The Autism Commissioner: A win for Autistic Rights or a Tool for Blame Avoidance

There has been much talk in the media recently about how inclusive the new Scottish Parliament is. Finally, inclusion seems to have made its way into Scottish politics. Indeed, the newly formed Government has pledged to create a Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodiversity Commissioner within the life cycle of the current parliament to champion the rights of those with autism and other neurological conditions. This commentary will explore the Commission, how it is to be made up and whether this is the best way forward.

With the Scottish Strategy for Autism, having expired in March 2021, there has been much discussion on the next steps to ensure, in my opinion, the strong progress that has been made over the last 10 years doesn't go quietly into the night. The cross-party group on autism which reports to the Scottish Government recommended in their report: The Accountability Gap; that a Commissioner for autism was required. Having attended several meetings of the cross-party group, including the final meeting where the Commissioner was discussed in some detail, I saw no consensus among members that this was the best way forward. However, with the strategy already confined to the history books, I fear that this is the only way autism is going to be kept at the top of the political agenda.

As discussed earlier the Commissioner was picked up by both the SNP and Labour in their manifestos. However, the cross-party group wanted a Commissioner purely for autism and that has now been diluted down to one for "*learning disabilities, autism and neurodiversity*". I can see several problems with this. Firstly, by tripling the number of elements the Commissioner must address, we triple the amount of work. Without increasing the budget accordingly, (something I think is highly unlikely), the impact that policy can have at a local level is likely to be diluted. Secondly, the way in which the language in the title of the Commissioner has been formulated gives rise to concerns. In my opinion, language and the order in which conditions are placed in a job title is important to autistic individuals. As such, placing learning disabilities before autism suggests to me that individuals with learning disabilities are more important than autistic individuals. When you consider that a lack of confidence is a common trait of those with autism this can be very damaging to their mental wellbeing as well as their self-worth. Not ideal for a position that was created to champion the rights of autistic individuals.

My concern is that by combining these conditions there will be a negative impact on the Commission's ability to champion employment rights for autistic individuals, again not really in line with the social model of supporting autistics and promoting their rights! Employment has also been of concern to those working in the autism field and having learning disabilities can lead to employers having negative feelings about employing individuals with such conditions. I understand that this misconception is rife among employers, I say misconception as I have spoken to many autistic individuals, many of whom are employed in occupations that require advanced skills

The second area of concern about the Commissioner is knowing exactly what it will look like. Currently no definitive plan has been laid out. The cross-party group calls for the Scottish Government, COSLA and other partners, autistic people, families, professionals and autism charities to have input into the Commissioner role. However, to me this is somewhat concerning. In my opinion, having so many differing organisations with differing priorities all vying to get what they want out of the Commissioner could lead to the adage of too many cooks spoil the broth, leading to increased difficulty in building consensus and establishing change.

I would like to suggest a strong solution to this problem: why don't we employ autistic individuals as Commissioners. This Commission could be structured in such a way as the autistic Commissioners were akin to non-executive directors in a company and neurotypical experts from both the government and COSLA as well as charities making up the rest of the board to provide advice and expertise. This sort of solution would be a real win for autistic rights, increasing autistic employment, improving mental health and wellbeing and enhancing the social model of supporting autistic individuals. Alas, I fear that we will go with the one size fits all approach of having a figurehead with a very basic understanding of autism, neurotypical experts as paid employees, paid administrative staff and input from the autistic community on a voluntary basis. This is potentially very damaging as it suggests that autistic individuals; such as myself with the necessary skills and experience are worth less to the country than an individual who has the same skills and experience but no autism diagnosis. This to me is clearly discrimination based on disability and certainly not a win for autistic rights.

As we can see from the above the notion of a Commissioner as a productive way to draw together all the work from the past 10 years of autism in Scotland is somewhat complex. The measure of success is whether the Commissioner can realistically support and champion the rights of autistic individuals or will the bureaucratic nature of these organisations hamper the position too much? As I have mentioned not much is known about the structure of the Commission and my concern is that we as a nation we haven't learnt from the mistakes of the past; resulting in a bureaucratic organisation that is too complex to champion real change; thus creating an organisation that becomes the perfect tool for blame avoidance from leaders both at a national and local level.