

RE- Petition P-05-761

29th October 2017

Dear Mr Rowlands

I am writing further to your correspondence dated 24th July 17, in which you included a copy of the petition submitted by Aled Thomas. We have now had a chance to consider this petition and also the attached response from Rebecca Evans AM.

We are pleased that the flexible support service we provide for more than 600 people with autism across South East Wales received the required level of support for this petition to have been considered.

Whilst we are very aware that Welsh Government cannot give the guarantee of permanent funding to any non-statutory organisation, I am equally mindful of the lack of transparency around the procurement process by which the £13m of funding allocated by the Welsh Government to develop an Integrated Autism Service (IAS) in Wales, was made, and its true impact to date.

ASCC's One Stop Shop Service (OSS), 21 High Street, which is based in Cardiff city centre, has been open since January 2015. It was developed over the two years preceding this and Government officials were aware of the plans to create this service which at the time met an identified need. The massive uptake of our services since provides ample evidence of its effectiveness in meeting need. WG officials were invited to the launch in January 2015 but did not reply to the invitation or attend, the impact of which was to both disappoint and concern us at a critical point in the charity's development.

We currently provide a range of services which benefit people with autism over the age of 16yrs across the whole of South East Wales region. These services include, Post Diagnostic groups run in partnership with Cardiff & Vale UHB (the only such service in Wales), Specialist Employment support, Specialist Benefits support, Anxiety Management groups, 1:1 problem solving and a range of individualised support. In addition, we run a range of activity/shared interest-based social opportunities both in the OSS and within the community. People registered with the service can access the support and the building facilities as and when they choose, with many people regularly dropping in as it represents

a “safe space” in the city centre. I have attached a copy of an OSS leaflet for your information.

Whilst we welcome the Welsh Government’s increased investment in autism in Wales, the development of their IAS has simply tried to duplicate many of the services which are currently provided by our charity. The impact has been to limit our ability to fundraise and support this existing, established and vital service for people with autism.

There was no consultation with the charity around the development of the IAS despite the high profile of the OSS service and the need to accurately and definitively identify gaps in existing provision. We are aware that other models, including the OSS run by our parent charity Autism Initiatives in Edinburgh, were visited by staff from the WLGA who travelled from Cardiff to Edinburgh for a 2 hour meeting in 2015. I had previously met with WG officials and Scottish Government officials at the Edinburgh OSS in May 2014 when we were developing the Cardiff OSS.

Between our chance meeting in Scotland May 2014 and a second meeting in August 15, there had been no communication or response from officials within the Department of Social Services, despite our several requests for a meeting with them. Eventually I met with WG Officials along with the Chief Executive of Autism Initiatives Group in August 2015. At this meeting we were informed by the Assistant Director for Social Services, with a junior colleague in attendance, that there was now an understanding that the model we had created in Wales works well and that they were keen to support this. At that time we were informed that there was limited resources available through the Autism Strategy and that an application to the Sustainable Social Services Fund would be welcomed.

Based upon their advice, a hastily prepared bid for this fund was submitted on 4th September 2015, outlining a plan to develop and improve access to services for people with autism across Wales, through the provision of flexible support staff and a single point of contact/access for people requiring information assistance and advice. At this time I met with Johanna Manikiza the ASD National Lead employed by the WLGA who informed me that she had submitted WLGA proposals to WG for a pilot Integrated Autism Service based on the model adopted by the Liverpool Asperger Team and that this would be trialed in two areas of Wales. No further consultation on the development of her proposal and service was sought by WG / WLGA.

We later became aware in April 2016 that plans for the pilot IAS had been scaled up to include a pan-Wales service which would receive £6m of WG funding. I met with Johanna Manikiza at this time and was informed that the WLGA/WG IAS was in fact going to mirror the services provided by the OSS and offer a comprehensive diagnostic service, with support for parents and adults with autism. In April 2017 it was announced that the IAS would receive a further £7m investment from WG.

I am aware that a sizable percentage of the £13m of funding has been allocated to support the work of the ASD National Coordinator and new Regional Development Team employed by the WLGA. My understanding is that this money supports seven job roles and also funds the hosting of the www.asdinfo.wales website, something who could have easily be provided far more cost-effectively by third sector organisations.

I have spoken to many public sector staff involved in the development of the Integrated Autism Services across SE Wales who have indicated that the service will not be able to meet its stated aims and will not be able to cope with the number of referrals going into each of the three services. Each have reflected how they really need the ongoing support of existing services such as the OSS to meet the needs of people with autism. We are aware of requests for funding made by public sector staff to be provided to the OSS to provide the support worker functions of the IAS, however these have been rebuffed out of hand.

In response to Rebecca Evans' letter in which she sates that the role of the third sector is valued and that the IAS seeks to enhance and work in partnership with existing services, our experience does not support her statement.

We are aware that The Sustainable Social Services Grant, if it is continued, may be a possible source of future funding, however as this is not guaranteed, nor is it available until 2019/20 it does not offer any support to our charity at this time. It is clear that the IAS will lean heavily on the OSS moving forward and we are very open to working in partnership with them, however funding and support to do this has not been forthcoming from statutory sources.

We would therefore be interested to understand the procurement process which was utilised to select the WLGA as the lead partner, host of the regional

development team and the www.asdinfo.wales website, especially in view of their function as a non-statutory organisation.

It is now unclear what opportunities exist for third sector organisations seeking to bring their flexibility and expertise to the development of the Wales Autism Strategy, which of course originated from the work of a Welsh charity, no longer in existence. Additionally we are conscious that people with autism themselves do not appear to have been consulted in large enough numbers to have had a meaningful input into the development of the IAS, and we would therefore welcome any move by WG to work to be more inclusive in their efforts to seek feedback and advice from people who are best placed to identify the support which they require.

We have recently held a consultation in the OSS with Paul Davies AM in which a number of people with autism took the opportunity to give feedback on existing services and share their aspirations for the support that may be forthcoming as the result of the proposed Autism Bill.

We look forward to your response regarding the way in which £13m of public funding has been allocated and would welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively in partnership with the IAS moving forward with equality of opportunity for third sector partners regarding funding opportunities in the future.

Kind regards

Gareth Morgan

