

**P-05-707 Teacher Training must Include Statutory Training in Autism –
Correspondence from the National Autistic Society to the Chair, 17.01.17**



Dear Mike,

RE: P-05-705 Teachers' training must include statutory training in autism

Please find enclosed a submission to the National Assembly for Wales' Petitions Committee outlining the National Autistic Society Cymru's position on initial teacher training in Wales.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and please do let me know if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Meleri Thomas

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External Affairs Manager

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**Submission to the National Assembly for Wales' Petitions Committee from The
National Autistic Society Cymru 17 January 2017**

Background

According to the Welsh Government, more than 5,300 autistic pupils were supported in mainstream schools either through School Action, School Action Plus or a Statement of Educational Need in 2016. This represents an increase of 254 per cent in the number of autistic children in maintained schools in Wales since 2003.

The vast majority of autistic pupils are in mainstream education rather than in specialist provision and so all teachers should expect to teach autistic children during their career. This means that all school staff who come into contact with, or make decisions about autistic pupils would benefit from an understanding of the condition.

We note that in England the UK Government has already confirmed that from September 2018 every new teacher will have to learn about the needs of autistic children and young people as part of their teacher training programme. We welcome this development in England.

The Welsh Government is currently transforming its autism provision through its new integrated autism service and its Additional Learning Needs reform. The National Autistic Society Cymru believes therefore that it is timely to consider including autism as a specific component of Initial Teacher Training and would strongly support such initiatives in Wales.

Why autism should be included within Initial Teacher Training

The first step in improving the educational experience and outcomes of autistic children is to improve the training that teachers receive. Autism should be included as a specific component within Initial Teacher Training courses for the following reasons:

- Autism is a common condition affecting one in one hundred pupils. This means that every teacher is likely to have an autistic child in their class

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during their career, and probably several.¹ There are more than 5,300 school-aged children with autism in Wales receiving additional support because of their autism, with the vast majority educated in mainstream schools;

- Understanding the reasons why children may respond in particular ways to particular situations, and knowing what to do to help, results in better outcomes for those children. Children with autism may need adjustments to be made to the classroom environment to enable them to focus on their learning.² Teachers should be provided with the right help to be able to make those adjustments for children with autism;
- Being taught in an environment in which autism is understood benefits not just children with autism but also their classmates, by helping everyone be more aware of each other's needs, offering a wider range of learning materials and reducing the risk of potentially disruptive behaviour;
- Strategies that are good practice in supporting children with autism are also good practice for children with various other special educational needs; and
- It is not uncommon for autistic children to develop mental health problems and fall behind both socially and academically if they are not adequately supported at school. In Wales, only one in five (21 per cent) of autistic pupils were achieving expected outcomes in Foundation Phase Indicator Assessments in 2015.

Benefits for newly qualified teachers

NAS Cymru believes that trainee teachers need an introduction to two things in relation to learners with additional learning needs (ALN):

- The personal attitudes, values, knowledge and skills that are required to enable them to support inclusion and diversity in their classroom; and
- The specific characteristics of the most commonly occurring conditions that their students are likely to have, including autism. In particular, they need to understand that disabilities such as autism can be 'hidden', with the result that children may have significant needs that are overlooked, because they 'don't look disabled'.

While a broad understanding of ALN is essential, this should not remain overly generalised, as this will not necessarily be effective in addressing the unique

¹ Baird, G. et al (2006), *Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: the Special Needs and Autism project (SNAP)*, *The Lancet*, 368 (9531), pp. 210-215.

² The National Autistic Society (2011), *Great expectations*.

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challenges of teaching autistic pupils. Initial Teacher Training courses should begin the process of equipping new teachers to meet the individual needs of every child, and to give them the knowledge and tools to provide the best possible support to autistic students. This should be backed up by continuing professional development throughout teachers' careers. The training they receive should:

- Prepare new teachers for the situations they are most likely to experience in the classroom;
- Offer a way of thinking about meeting the needs of children with autism for their career ahead, recognising that children on the autism spectrum think and learn differently and are often affected by severe anxiety; and
- Focus on treating children as individuals and overcoming specific barriers to learning,

This training should be put in place regardless of training route, whether as part of a traditional college or university-based course or via a schools-based route.

What autistic children and their families currently experience at school

Our recent Act Now survey showed that of those who responded over a quarter of parents or carers (27 per cent) of autistic pupils currently in primary school are not satisfied with their teachers' understanding of autism.

Parents also report having to fight to get the right help for their child in school. Recent statistics from the Special Educational Needs Tribunal Wales (SENTW) showed that families with autistic go to Tribunal more often than families with any other special educational need. In 2013-14, more than a third (35 per cent) of all SENTW hearings involved families with autistic children. A better trained workforce – of which Initial Teacher Training will be one part – would help ensure that teachers are better equipped to support autistic children. If autistic children receive better support at school this could improve their outcomes and potentially reduce the need for families to go to Tribunal.