



Mental health and Autism  
Dame Christine Lenehan CDC

# This presentation....

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- Comes out of work on the reviews
- Has more questions than answers
- Builds on the excellent work of the Autistic community



# Lenehan Review I

This Review was triggered by a small number of individual cases. They focussed public and Ministerial attention on the care, support and treatment provided to the small group of children and young people with complex needs (and behaviour that challenges) involving mental health problems and learning disabilities and/ or autism.

Alistair Burt, the then Minister of State for Care and Support, asked for a Review to “take a strategic overview and recommend what practical action can be taken by Government Departments and partners at national level to make the system better able to co-ordinate care, support and treatment for children and young people with complex needs (and behaviour that challenges) involving mental health problems and learning disabilities and/ or autism.”



## Lenehan Review 2

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To look at the outcomes and experiences of children and young people in residential special schools and residential special colleges

To focus on the most complex but to take the wider picture

To take evidence from the widest variety of sources

To get a clear picture of how many , who , where

To look at models of care



# What have we learnt ?

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That children and young people with autism and additional needs make up a significant part of the population of patients in assessment and treatment units and in residential special schools

That there are challenges with diagnosis and definition across the spectrum

That there are workforce challenges

That young people are failed by mainstream services

That we don't have an effective national strategy for children and autism



# Numbers and data

There are approximately 200 young people under 18 in mental health inpatient units most of these have autism , usually with challenging behaviour and or mental health needs

There are approximately 5,000 children and young people in residential special schools , the biggest proportion of these have either autism or SEMH

Within the group with autism , there are two distinct groups of young people

Young people who are academically able but for whom a mainstream school didn't work

Young people with complex autism and severe learning disability



# Diagnosis / definitions

The label of autism was widely used

The label of SEMH was used , this came out of the Children and Families Act 2014 as the re categorisation of BESD , in terms of this , while the change was welcome , there was no thought on what this would mean in practice

Schools told us that ;

- The two groups would always be separate
- The two groups were the same
- The two groups crossed over into each other

The label didn't change the way that students were necessarily understood and approached , in either schools , or on health units



# Workforce/skills

Throughout all services there was a dearth of staff with skills and understanding

This means that ;

The traits of autism where reasonable adjustments could easily be made were not always recognised

Staff became disempowered really quickly and did not have appropriate strategies

Once this happened staff did not know how to get support

Escalation to CAMHS services was common , but usually unsuccessful

There is a shortage of trained staff at all levels who understand autism/mental health and learning disabilities and the cross

There is a need for professional ownership of the issue



# Living with failure

All of the children we spoke to were aware of failing

One school said " our first role is self esteem because the children have been failed so often "

Another young man with autism asked about why his school was good ,

" because the staff give a damn "

All had been excluded from schools a number of times because of behaviour ,

This, often as a result of a lack of understanding of autism

They had almost all been bullied for " being different "

You would want to ask whether the mental health needs of these young people were part of their condition , or a consequence of the circumstances they find themselves in



# So is autism a mental health need ?

It was clear in the reviews that some young people with Autism had mental health needs , for some this was about depression and anxiety , for lots it was self esteem

For many mental health was the avenue for getting challenging behaviour looked at

The best services for young people with complex autism were services which pulled together a range of skills to understand the child in detail

Eg Ealing and The Bridge



# Dispatches and Alderwood

Finally , Under Lock and Key , a Dispatches programme recorded the lives of two young people with severe autism in a mental health unit. The young people were heavily medicated because of their mental health issues .

Following campaigns by their parents they were moved to a community placement

We visited , their view

“ These young people did not have mental health needs, people just didn't understand their autism ”

