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Press release

Embargo: 11.00am Wednesday 21 January 2009

MP brings autism law nearer

First out of the private members' ballot, Cheryl Gillan MP, brought the first ever autism law a step closer today (Wednesday 21 January), announcing she will take forward the Autism Bill, with the backing of The National Autistic Society (NAS) and 13 other autism charities. The MP for Chesham and Amersham declared her support in response to local authorities' complete failure to meet the needs of the over half a million children and adults with autism in the UK.

Cheryl Gillan MP said;

“It strikes me as wholly unfair how hard people affected by autism have to fight to get the help they so desperately need. The continuing postcode lottery of autism services across the UK is simply unacceptable and incredibly damaging. Creating the first ever autism law is crucial to helping local authorities take the necessary action and recognise their responsibilities towards this severely excluded group. Many MPs, cross-party, have already offered their support and I hope many more will back this vitally important bill - it has the potential to radically transform thousands of lives in every constituency and community.”

The announcement comes after the NAS / *Exist* campaign revealed many young people with autism don't receive the kind of support that would help them achieve their potential in adulthood and at least 1 in 3 adults with the condition are experiencing serious mental health difficulties as a result. Local authorities have been surprisingly slow to react; around two thirds

of local authorities in England do not know how many children with autism there are in their area and just two are aware of the number of adults with the condition.

The Autism Bill could be the first condition-specific private members' bill to be enshrined in law. Mark Lever, Chief Executive of the NAS, said;

“Very little current policy or guidance specifically applies to people with autism so Cheryl Gillan’s Autism Bill is great news for the thousands of people with autism who tell us they feel isolated and ignored. It is a huge step forward in ensuring a brighter future for people with this serious, lifelong and disabling condition, but we urgently need support to make this law. Without the right help autism can have a profound and sometimes devastating effect and we will keep campaigning until we see real change at ground level.”

Cheryl Gillan’s Autism Bill aims to place a duty on local authorities and NHS bodies to recognise and fulfil their responsibilities towards people with autism. Measures proposed include: improving local information on the number of children and adults with autism, providing effective support from child to adult services, appropriate staff training, and the promotion of independent living for people with the disability.

The NAS, the UK’s leading charity for people with autism and their families, is urging people to pledge their support for the bill at www.think-differently.org.uk/campaign.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- Cheryl Gillan’s Autism Bill is backed by The National Autistic Society, Wirral Autistic Society, Autism Research Centre, TreeHouse, Hampshire Autistic Society, Staffordshire Adults Autistic Society, Research Autism, Autism Anglia, The Wessex Autistic Society, Autism Education Trust, Autism Speaks and Autism West Midlands.
- The NAS / *Exist* campaign launched on 5 February 2008. It aims to improve the lives of the many thousands of adults with autism who are isolated and ignored. Most are unable to access the support they need and are often dependent on their families. The lack of understanding, support and suitable services can have a devastating impact. We want Government and local authorities to take action to transform lives. For further information visit www.think-differently.org.uk/campaign.
- In response to the / *Exist* campaign, in May 2008 the Government committed to a landmark national adult autism strategy.
- Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition,

which means that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

- Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language.

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people with autistic spectrum disorders and their families. Founded in 1962, it continues to spearhead national and international initiatives and provide a strong voice for all people with autism. The NAS provides a wide range of services to help people with autism and Asperger syndrome live their lives with as much independence as possible.

The NAS relies on the support of its members and donors to continue its vital work for people with autism. To become a member, make a donation or to find out more about the work of the NAS, visit the NAS website www.autism.org.uk.

For more information about autism and for help in your area, call the NAS Autism Helpline on: 0845 070 4004 10am-4pm, Monday to Friday, (local rates apply).

The NAS Autism Services Directory is the UK's most comprehensive directory of services and events for people with autism. Visit www.autism.org.uk/autismdirectory to find autism services and support networks in your area.