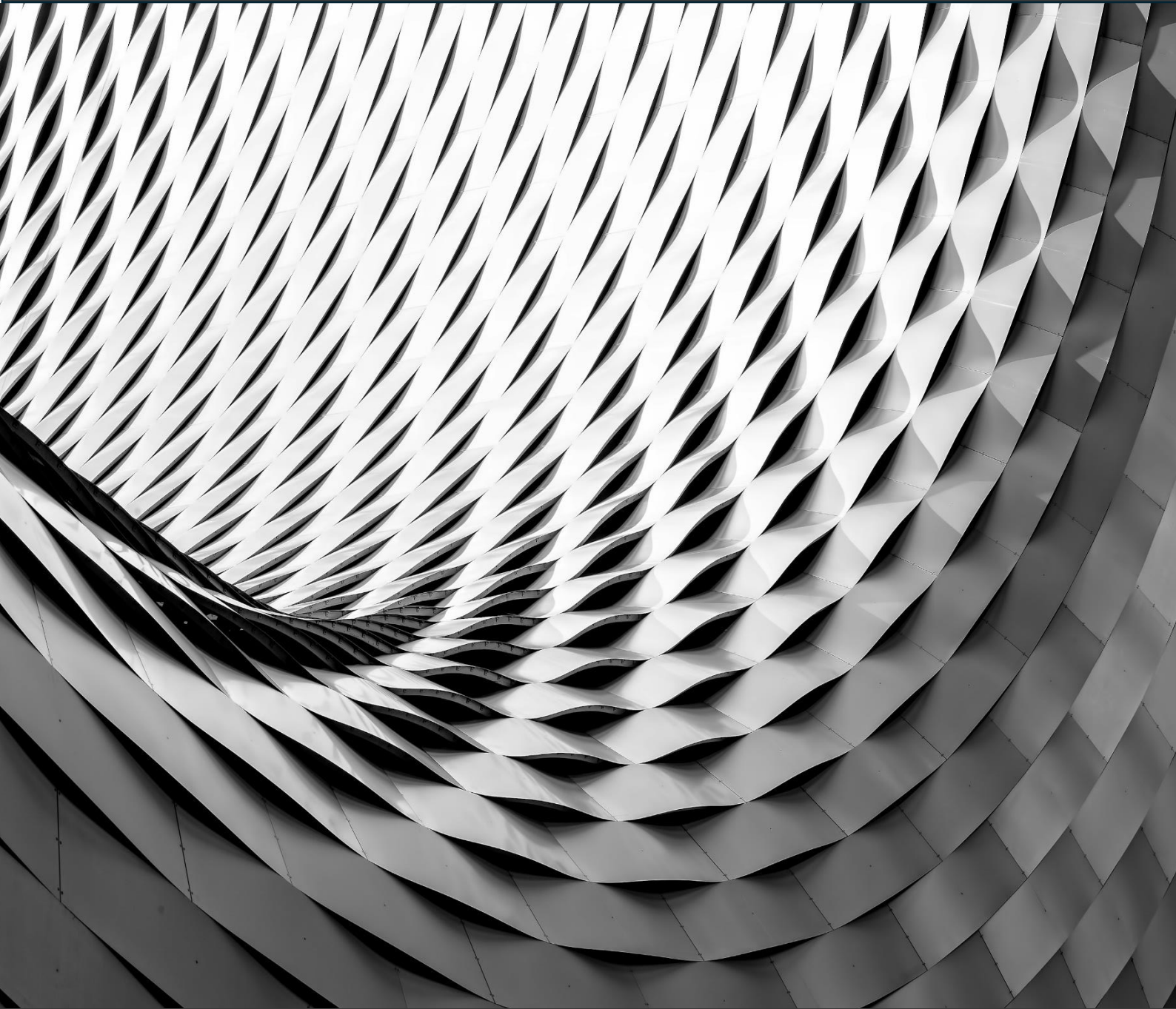




Independent Autism Reviewer
for Northern Ireland



BRIEFING SERIES – Vol. 1

Autism Strategy 2023-28 – Final Phase
Delivery

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing provides an initial, high-level overview of areas that I consider are critical to the successful delivery of the Autism Strategy 2023-28 as we move towards the final phase delivery. They are also areas that I believe, if developed and implemented in full, will provide the core foundations for future strategies in Northern Ireland.

In summary the areas highlighted in this briefing relate to:

- the endorsement of an overarching vision for autistic people, their families, and carers,
- placing a renewed focus on delivery against existing commitments with deliverable and measurable targets,
- adopting a revised approach to monitoring, to more effectively track progress and impart clearer and stronger accountability,
- the standardisation of data to improve the ability to understand and identify where progress is, or is not, being made,
- supporting inclusion, participation and involvement of those with lived experience into every stage of planning, delivery, and review, and
- the greater integration of quantitative and qualitative (lived experience) insight.

BRIEFING SERIES

Autism Strategy 2023-2028

Final Phase Delivery

This is the first in a series of concise, conceptual briefing reports issued under my statutory remit¹ as the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland (Independent Reviewer).

As the Independent Reviewer, my role is to hold systems to account. I will scrutinise what is delivered and challenge what is not.

Within my resourced capacity, I will support systems to adopt both the letter and the spirit of the 'Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011' (the Autism Act).²

This briefing series will provide targeted, incremental guidance to Ministers, departments and delivery partners to help:

- ***Deliver the Autism Strategy 2023–2028 (the Strategy)³ in its final three years, and***
- ***Build the legal, structural, and cultural foundations for subsequent strategies that are fully compliant with the Autism Act and reflect the rights, diversity, and lived realities of Northern Ireland's autistic population.***

¹ Sections 3C and 3D [Autism Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

² [Autism Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

³ [Autism Strategy 2023-28](#)

Each briefing will act as both a point of accountability and a practical pathway on key areas shaped by lived experience and focused on outcomes.

TO AUTISTIC PEOPLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This series begins with my sincere thanks to every autistic person that I have met since my appointment. I have valued your company.

Your presence, insight, experiences and knowledge have shaped every part of my work and will continue to do so.

Each report will be built upon your honesty. It reflects what you have shared with me, and it is intended to help drive the change you are calling for.

TO FAMILIES, CARERS AND ALLIES

I acknowledge your commitment and persistence as you navigate systems that are too slow to change.

I recognise your concern, your frustration, your fatigue.

You are asking for fairness. And you are right to do so.

Please keep speaking up. It matters.

CONTEXT

The Strategy is underpinned by legal duties on all departments, as set out in the Autism Act. It also carries a moral imperative to uphold the dignity, rights, and inclusion of Northern Ireland's autistic population, in line with its core vision - **“To Respect, To Listen, To Involve.”**

The Strategy was developed and launched in a political and operational landscape marked by exceptional systemic disruption and social adversity.⁴

The convergence of unprecedented pressures shaped the trajectory of the Strategy and its statutory compliance. They constrained delivery capacity and undermined the shared departmental ownership critical for success.

The Strategy has now entered its final phase under markedly different conditions to those at its launch.

The next three years present the final opportunity for focused delivery of the commitments set out in this strategy.

Success must rest upon the foundations of whole-of-government leadership⁵ and collective responsibility that integrates action to achieve common purpose.⁶

⁴ Inter alia Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, repeated suspensions of the NI Executive, the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living and inflation crisis, sustained public sector strikes and workforce shortages, widening health and social care inequalities alongside wider social challenges.

⁵ Pivotal, *Policy Delivery in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Pivotal, 2025), [pivotal_report_policydelivery_final.pdf](#)

⁶ OECD, *Northern Ireland (United Kingdom): Implementing Joined-up Governance for a Common Purpose*, OECD Public Governance Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264260016-en>.

A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT

Autism and inclusion are not the responsibility of a single department. Every department that serves or employs people is already serving and employing autistic people.

As I often remind leaders, ***“Where there are people, there are autistic people.”***

Inclusion must therefore be intentionally and instinctively incorporated into all decisions, policies, and services. It must become a natural part of how government works - this is reinforced by equality legislation and international obligations.⁷

My vision is simple,

“A Northern Ireland where autistic people of all ages know they belong, feel valued, and are supported to be their whole authentic selves.”

I invite Ministers, Members of the Legislative Assembly and leaders across government to publicly endorse this vision.

By doing so, you will help set the direction and tone for a shared, collective approach to the delivery of your statutory responsibilities, and lay the foundations for future strategies that are resilient, legally compliant, and politically sustainable.

⁷ [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#); [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#); [Human Rights Act 1998](#); [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - Articles](#) | [Division for Inclusive Social Development \(DISD\)](#)

DELIVERY OF EXISTING PROMISES

The Department of Health, as lead department, will coordinate final-phase planning for the Strategy. Other departments must actively engage with this process, bringing their own statutory duties and areas of responsibility to the table.

Attainable delivery will require:

- ***Focused, disciplined planning to secure implementation of existing commitments,***
- ***A tight, SMART-aligned⁸ delivery plan compatible with the proposed Monitoring Framework developed by the Independent Reviewer,***
- ***Clear assignment of departmental and delivery partner responsibility for each activity within the delivery plan, and***
- ***Express agreement to delivery activities should be documented to support transparency, accountability, and monitoring.***

Final-phase planning must prioritise completion of the Strategy's five existing commitments.

Disciplined planning on its own is not enough - delivery that ignores lived experience overlooks the real barriers people face, and risks failure.

⁸ Objectives and activities that are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**ime-Bound.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

When autistic people, families, and carers help shape the policies and services that affect their lives, outcomes improve, delivery strengthens, and public trust grows.

Evidence and experience consistently demonstrate that co-design and co-production lead to better results, fewer course corrections, and stronger legitimacy.

Departments and delivery partners should:

- ***Build participation into every stage of planning, delivery, and review,***
- ***Ensure participation is accessible, proportionate, and respectful,***
- ***Partner with trusted Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations, particularly to reach underrepresented groups,***
- ***Record and track engagement and impact to support monitoring and reporting, and***
- ***Recognise participation data as a rights-based asset to strengthen accountability and inform decisions.***

Authentic participation and engagement are an effective safeguard to strengthen accountability, build public confidence and turn commitments into meaningful outcomes.

ENHANCED MONITORING & REPORTING

Monitoring without robust data is like navigating without a map. Consistent, comparable, credible data, connected to lived experience, is the compass of effective delivery.

The 2023–24⁹ and 2024–25¹⁰ Monitoring Reports, reveal systemic weaknesses:

- **Inconsistent definitions, measures, and timeframes,**
- **Significant gaps and underreporting,**
- **Non-comparable formats and absence of data broken down by key groups,¹¹ and**
- **Variable quality and lack of transparency on sources and methods.**

These are fundamental barriers to accountability and statutory compliance. Without shared standards, the Strategy cannot be reliably assessed, inequities remain hidden, and delivery cannot be targeted where it is most needed.

I have developed a monitoring framework with a ready-to-use monitoring return for all departments and delivery partners to use. Its implementation requires no new programme budget.

The framework and return will:

- **Standardise data for year-on-year tracking,**
- ***Integrate quantitative and qualitative (lived experience) insight,***

⁹ [One Year Monitoring / Progress Report](#)

¹⁰ [Two Year Monitoring / Progress Report](#)

¹¹ Example disaggregation - age, gender, socio-economic status, geography, disability/health status (including co-occurring needs), ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

- **Support early course correction through mid-year reviews,**
- **Strengthen accountability by routing through Ministers, and**
- **Enhance transparency and build trust.**

The Department of Health and I are working to finalise the framework to ensure there is no duplication and for utilisation against the remaining three-year delivery plan. This proposed framework complements the concurrent statutory monitoring duties of the Department of Health and the Independent Reviewer, whilst maintaining my independence.

Oversight and scrutiny of the monitoring framework sits within my statutory functions under the Autism Act.

REBUILDING COLLECTIVE DELIVERY INFRASTRUCTURE

To secure continuity and strengthen delivery, I request that each Minister ***nominate a Senior Departmental Lead***¹² (and contingency) as the first point of contact for the Independent Reviewer.

These light-touch but high-value roles will provide clarity on accountability, safeguard continuity when personnel change, and ensure autism is consistently considered in planning and decision-making.

Departments are complex organisations with wide ranging remits. A nominated lead provides an accessible and consistent point of contact which can help support and build a more collaborative and co-ordinated approach between my work as the Independent Reviewer and departments.

This is not intended to replace or replicate the role or function of existing cross-departmental or sectoral forums.

Nominated Senior Departmental Leads will also be able to provide support to the roll-out of the enhanced monitoring framework as well as keeping each department connected to the wider system and cultural shifts that are shaping inclusion in Northern Ireland. This enables every department to demonstrate its statutory commitment under the Autism Act.

¹² This request is aimed at a Senior official at Director level or above

CONCLUSION

There has been significant work undertaken on the development and delivery of the existing Strategy and that should be rightly acknowledged.

However, it is all too clear that significant challenges remain. Challenges that autistic people, their families, and their carers face on a daily basis. I am determined that they will not face these challenges alone.

I believe that if we come together with a renewed sense of purpose and a clear commitment to strive to deliver the improvements that are needed, real change can be achieved.

The areas I have highlighted in this report are high-level. They are starting points for improvement. It will take consistent and ongoing effort, and a commitment to working collaboratively, to achieve the outcomes that will provide meaningful change for autistic people.

The responsibility to deliver this rests across all of government, and across all sectors. I firmly believe that we have a clear opportunity in front of us. It is one which will only be realised if it is taken together.

Emma Cuth.

