



**Independent Autism Reviewer
for Northern Ireland**

Annual Report

Sept 2024 – Mar 2026

FOREWORD

This is my first Annual Report as the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland.

I want to begin by thanking autistic people who have shared their experiences, insight and perspectives with me during this reporting period. Your voices have grounded my work. I am also grateful to families, carers, professionals, organisations and those working across public services who have engaged with me.

I also acknowledge Members of the Legislative Assembly and officials across Departments and public bodies who have participated in the scrutiny process. That participation is an essential part of ensuring that accountability can operate in practice.

Northern Ireland has had a statutory framework for autism and a cross-government strategy for over a decade, with high expectations for delivery. What I have heard, consistently and clearly, is that meaningful change is not yet being delivered reliably in practice.

Activity is evident. Reliable delivery is not. Too often, autistic people and their families are left to piece services together and manage the gaps between them. This is not how public systems should operate.

The role of the Independent Autism Reviewer was established by the Assembly to provide something that did not previously exist: independent scrutiny of how law, policy, funding and services operate in practice across government in relation to Northern Ireland's autistic population, their families and carers. This report marks the first application of that scrutiny.

Across the areas examined during this reporting period, a pattern has emerged. Responsibility is often shared, but not always clearly defined or coordinated. Delivery cannot always be demonstrated. Where that is the case, accountability is weakened.

For families, this is not something distant or abstract. It is experienced as delay, fragmentation, uncertainty and avoidable distress.

This must now change.



Ema Cubitt
Independent Autism
Reviewer for Northern
Ireland



AT A GLANCE

The Central Issue

Northern Ireland has had the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, strengthened through subsequent legislation, and successive autism strategies in place for over a decade.

For too many autistic people and their families, those commitments are not yet consistently experienced in everyday life.

Why this Matters

Where delivery is not clear and coordinated, outcomes are inconsistent and confidence in public systems is undermined.

What this Means for Government

Government cannot yet clearly and consistently demonstrate how commitments set by the Northern Ireland Assembly for Northern Ireland's autistic population, their families and carers are delivered across systems.

The Expectation is Clear

Commitments set in law and strategy must be delivered and demonstrated in practice.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The report is structured in four parts:

Part One – Statutory Context and Remit

Part Two – Oversight and Scrutiny

Part Three – Scrutiny Activity

Part Four – Impact and Next Phase

VISION

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



INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Report

This is the first Annual Report of the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland (“the Autism Reviewer”).

This first reporting period¹ marks the establishment of a new statutory office and the commencement of independent scrutiny within the legislative framework established by the Northern Ireland Assembly (“the Assembly”).

This report is issued and laid before the Assembly in accordance with Section 3C of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, as amended (“the Autism Act”), which requires the Autism Reviewer to report annually on the exercise of the statutory functions.

This report sets out the principal scrutiny, monitoring, and advisory activity undertaken during the reporting period, together with the key themes and insights arising from this work, what this reveals about the operation of systems across government, and how this informs accountability to the Assembly.

This report covers the period from September 2024 to March 2026¹. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of every activity undertaken or all issues impacting Northern Ireland’s autistic population, their families and carers.

¹ From 2026 onwards annual reporting periods will follow a standard April to March cycle, aligning with the Northern Ireland financial year and wider public sector planning arrangements.

PART ONE



STATUTORY CONTEXT AND REMIT

Northern Ireland's Statutory Framework for Autism

Prior to 2011, Northern Ireland did not have a statutory framework for autism as a cross-government area of responsibility. There was no legal requirement for a coordinated, cross-departmental strategy and no formal mechanism for reporting to the Assembly. Planning and service development operated on an administrative basis, with limited structured accountability across government.

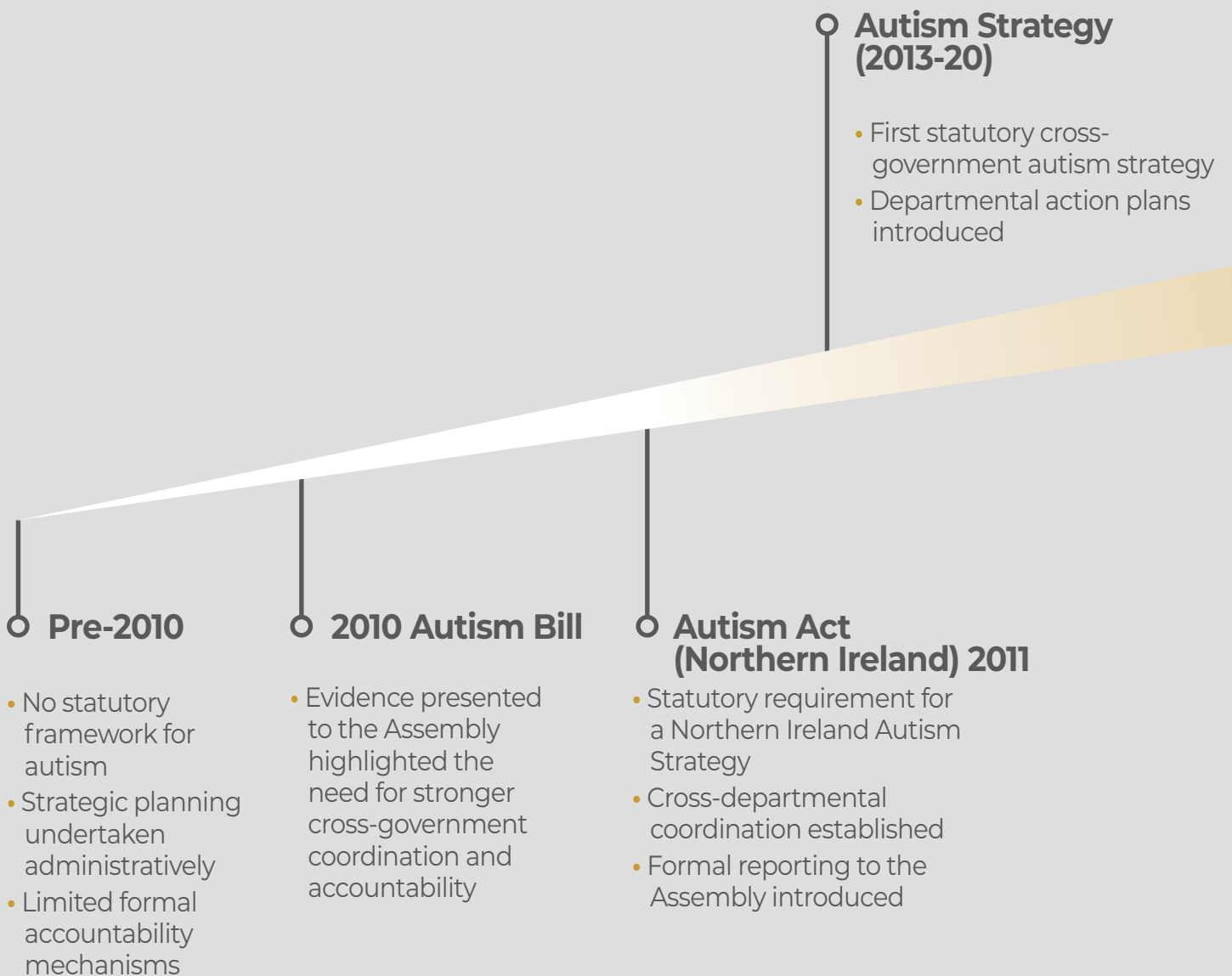
Evidence provided by families, advocates and representative organisations brought these limitations into clear view and demonstrated the need for coordinated, accountable cross-departmental action.

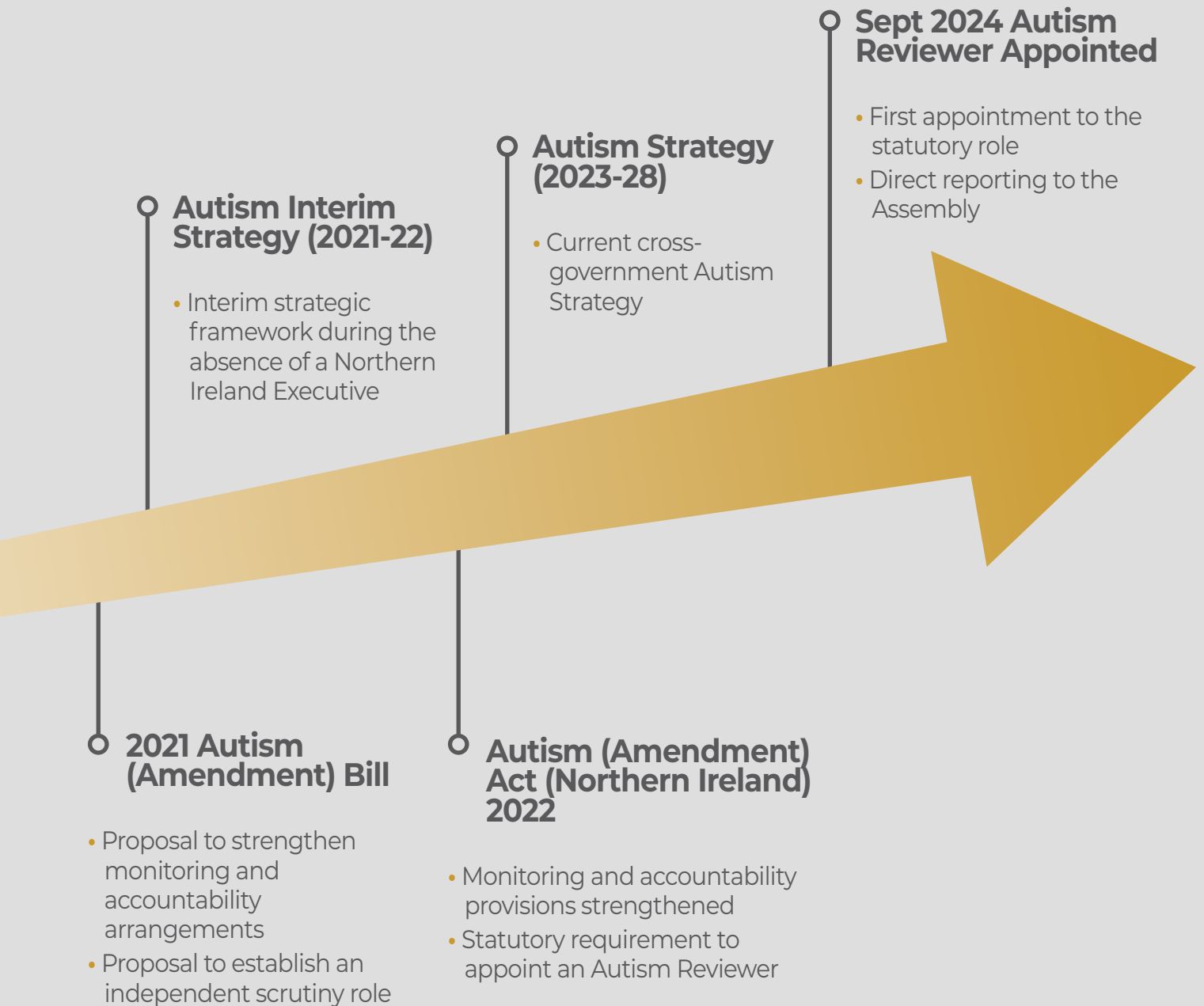
The introduction of the Autism Act established autism within a statutory framework for the first time. It placed a legal requirement on the Department of Health ("the Department") to prepare and report on a cross-departmental Autism Strategy and required Northern Ireland departments to co-operate in the preparation, and implementation of the Strategy within their areas of responsibility.

The Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 ("Amendment Act") strengthened that framework by enhancing monitoring and accountability arrangements and establishing the Autism Reviewer as a statutory mechanism for independent scrutiny.

This legislative framework defines how responsibility for autism is exercised across government and provides the statutory basis for independent scrutiny.

INCREASING STATUTORY EXPECTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY





The Role of the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland

The Amendment Act required the appointment of an Autism Reviewer as an **independent scrutiny mechanism** within Northern Ireland's statutory autism framework.

Ema Cubitt, LLB, was appointed as the first Autism Reviewer by the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt, in August 2024, and she took up office in September 2024.

Remit and Scope of the Independent Autism Reviewer

Statutory Remit

The remit of the Autism Reviewer is set out in the Autism Act.

The Autism Reviewer:

- **monitors** the implementation and effectiveness of the autism strategy
- **assesses** the efficacy of funding arrangements in respect of autism
- **keeps under review** the adequacy and effectiveness of the law, policy and practice relating to autism
- **keeps under review** the adequacy and effectiveness of services for autistic people, their families and carers
- **commissions** independent research on best international practice
- **advises** the Northern Ireland Assembly, where requested, on matters relating to autism
- **performs** any other functions conferred in accordance with the Autism Act²



This report demonstrates how these statutory functions have been exercised in practice during the reporting period.

The Autism Reviewer does not exercise executive, regulatory or complaints-handling functions. Responsibility for policy development, service delivery and operational decision-making rests with Ministers, Departments and relevant public authorities.

² During the reporting period, no additional functions were conferred on the Autism Reviewer under Section 3D(1)(g) of the Autism Act.



Scope of Activity

The Autism Reviewer applies the statutory remit across systems that affect and impact the lives of autistic people.

Autism intersects with multiple areas of public policy and service delivery, including **health and social care, education, justice, employment, housing, transport and community life**. Support and services are delivered through a combination of mainstream and specialist provision operating across the life course and within a wide range of public services and sectors.



The statutory remit of the Autism Reviewer provides independent, system-level oversight across these areas.

In exercising this remit, the Autism Reviewer:

- **examines** how law, policy and services operate in practice
- **draws on** engagement, lived experience, administrative material and research evidence
- **analyses** information from multiple sources to assess consistency and system interaction
- **monitors** legislative, policy and fiscal developments relevant to the remit

The Autism Reviewer **determines the focus, sequencing and depth of scrutiny** within the statutory remit.

What's Not Within the Remit of the Autism Reviewer

The Autism Reviewer:

- **does not investigate** individual complaints or casework
- **does not direct** public authorities or exercise enforcement powers
- **does not undertake** operational decision-making within Departments or services
- **does not represent** sectional or advocacy interests



Individual experiences are considered as evidence of system operation.

Independence of the Autism Reviewer

Independence underpins the credibility, authority and effectiveness of the Autism Reviewer and the Office of the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland (“the Office”).³

The Autism Reviewer **acts independently** of Ministers, Northern Ireland Departments and public authorities in the exercise of statutory functions.

The Autism Reviewer:

- determines the matters subject to scrutiny
- determines the timing, focus and depth of scrutiny activity
- forms independent judgements based on the available evidence
- reports those judgements publicly to the Assembly

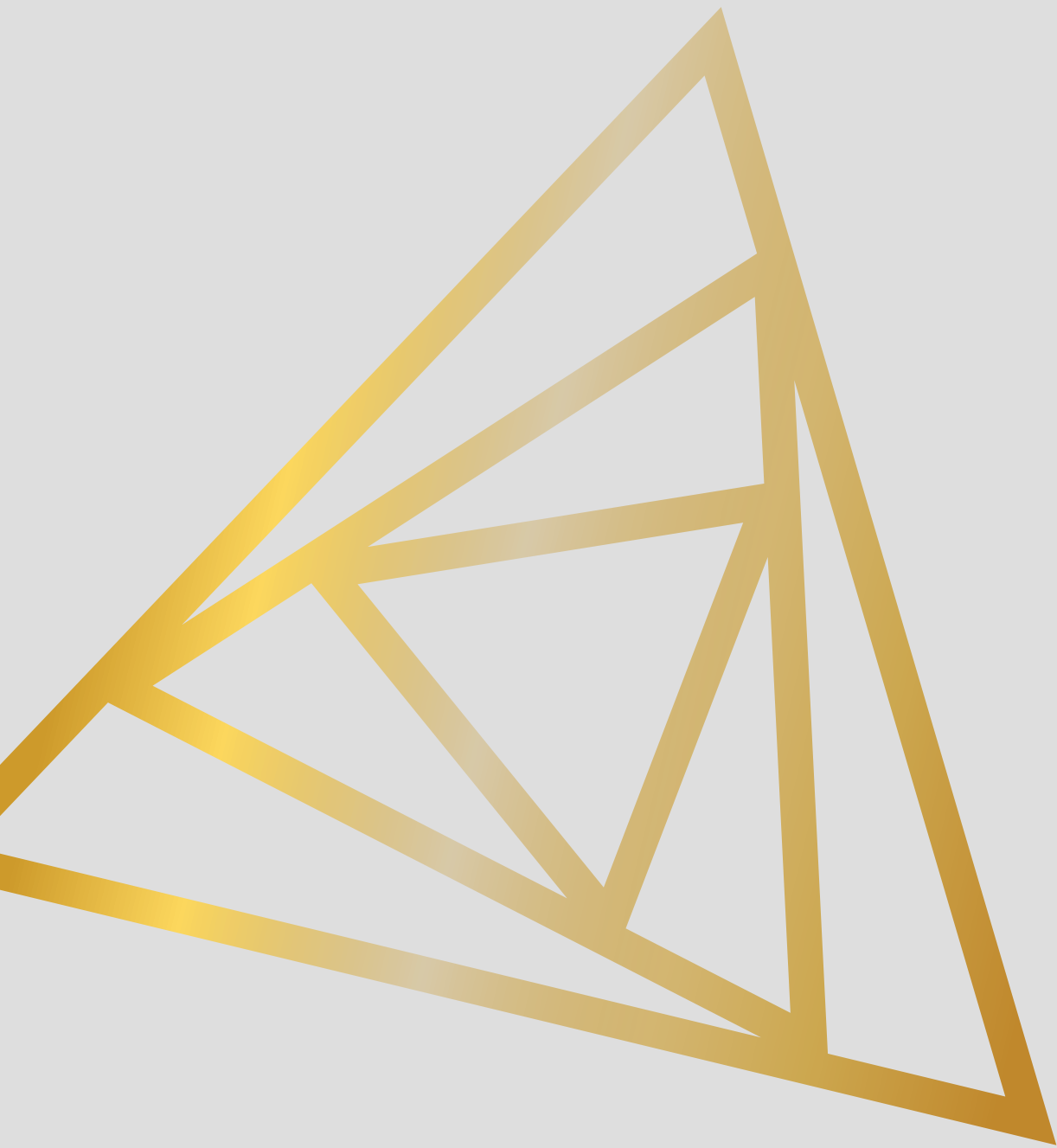
The Autism Reviewer **does not act on behalf** of any Department, public authority or stakeholder interest and is not subject to direction in relation to the exercise of statutory functions.

The Autism Reviewer operates within a statutory framework established by the Assembly and is **accountable through formal public reporting**. The Autism Reviewer is non-partisan and does not operate as an advocacy function.

This framework secures independent statutory scrutiny as part of Northern Ireland’s public accountability system, enabling responsibility across government to be examined and report publicly on it.



³ The Office of the Independent Autism Reviewer (“the Office”) refers to organisational and operational arrangements established to support the Autism Reviewer in exercising the statutory functions set out in the Autism Act.



PART TWO



OVERSIGHT AND SCRUTINY

Oversight and scrutiny are complementary functions within the Autism Reviewer's statutory role. Together they maintain visibility of statutory duties, public commitments and the use of public resources, and strengthen accountability across government.

The Autism Reviewer's Oversight and Scrutiny Framework

The Autism Reviewer applies an oversight and scrutiny framework across the statutory remit. This framework provides the operational basis through which the Autism Reviewer discharges the statutory functions set out in the Autism Act.

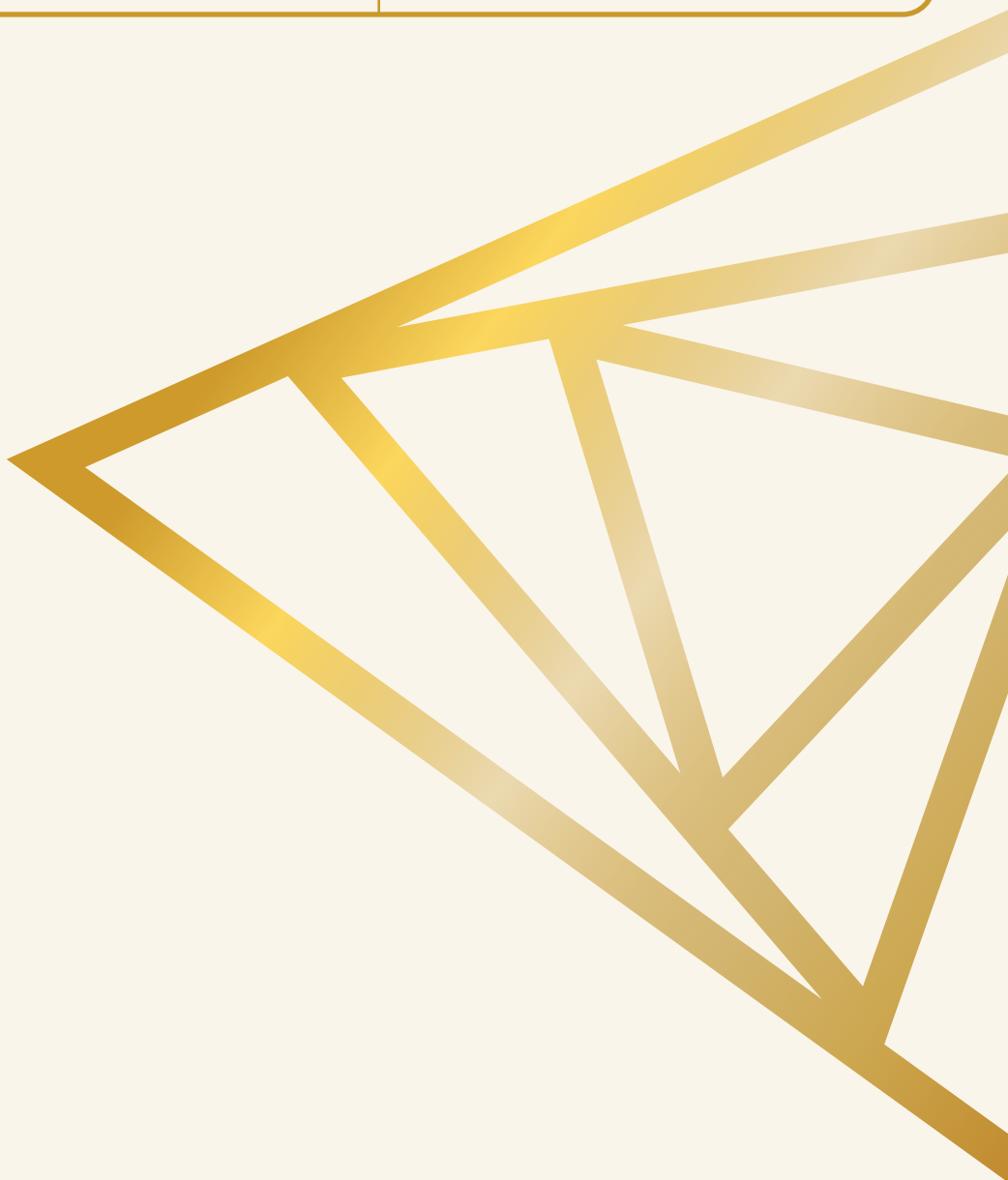
Oversight maintains system-level visibility. Scrutiny applies targeted examination.



	Oversight	Scrutiny
UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION		
Purpose	Maintains system-level visibility across statutory duties, public commitments and service delivery within the remit.	Examines specific issues, decisions or areas of practice to assess how statutory duties and public commitments are operating in practice.
Focus	The overall functioning of systems, including patterns, pressures and developments across Departments and services.	Defined issues, risks or matters of public interest identified through oversight, engagement or evidence.
Level of Examination	Ongoing, cross-system review to maintain visibility and identify areas requiring attention.	Targeted and structured examination of specific issues within the statutory remit.
HOW THE WORK IS CARRIED OUT		
Activity	Monitors legislative, policy, funding and operational developments; reviews evidence from multiple sources; identifies patterns, inconsistencies and emerging risks.	Analyses evidence in detail; examines whether statutory duties are being met and commitments realised; tests how systems operate in practice.
Key Questions	Are statutory responsibilities visible and operating coherently across systems? Are patterns or risks emerging that require further examination?	Are legal duties being met in practice? Are commitments translating into consistent delivery? Are public resources being used effectively and accountably?



	Oversight	Scrutiny
WHY IT MATTERS		
Intended Outcome / Value	Maintains visibility of how systems are operating and ensures emerging issues are identified and understood at an early stage.	Provides independent, evidence-based examination and challenge, strengthening transparency, accountability and system improvement.
Outcome of the Work	Identifies areas requiring further scrutiny, engagement or examination.	Produces independent findings and may inform advice, recommendations or further scrutiny activity.



Scrutiny Strands

The oversight and scrutiny framework is applied through three interconnected scrutiny strands – capacity, evidence and examination.

Together, these form the basis on which independent statutory scrutiny is exercised.





SCRUTINY STRAND ONE – CAPACITY

As a permanent statutory office with a cross-government remit, the long-term effectiveness of the role depends on **stable financial arrangements, proportionate operational support** and **continuity beyond any individual office holder**. These are conditions for the sustained exercise of independent statutory scrutiny.

The Act does not prescribe an operational structure for the role, and no directly comparable statutory oversight function has been identified within the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland or comparable jurisdictions.

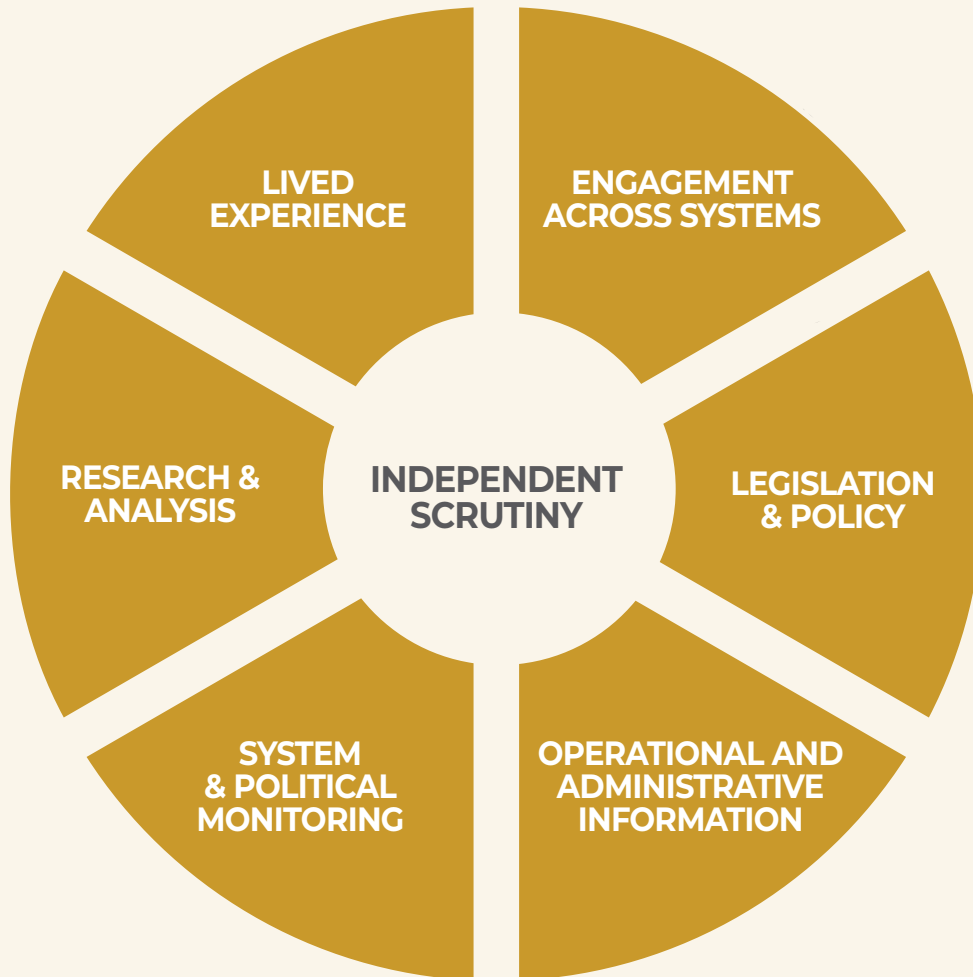
The establishment of the Office therefore required the development of a distinct model for independent scrutiny. This was undertaken within a constrained operational context.

This work was led by the Autism Reviewer and supported by the Head of Office, enabling the commencement of independent scrutiny across relevant government systems.

Capacity Established	Key Elements Established
Governance and Statutory Framework	Governance arrangements, organisational structures and operational systems established to support the independent exercise of statutory scrutiny functions under the Act.
People and Staffing	Autism Reviewer appointed and took up office in September 2024. Head of Office appointed February 2025. Initial period of part-time administrative support. The Office currently comprises the Autism Reviewer and the Head of Office.
Operational Infrastructure	Core operational processes and systems established to support scrutiny activity. A public-facing website was developed and launched to promote accessibility and public understanding of the statutory role. Responsibility for website content and maintenance sits within the Office.
Resourcing Environment	The Autism Reviewer operates within a defined annual allocation of working days determined through Departmental administrative arrangements. No ring-fenced or recurrent funding was available during the reporting period. Limited programme funding was confirmed in late 2025.

SCRUTINY STRAND TWO – EVIDENCE

The Autism Reviewer draws on multiple sources of evidence through structured engagement, analytical review and ongoing monitoring of legislative, policy and operational developments.



This material is analysed collectively to identify patterns, assess consistency and understand how systems operate in practice. Evidence is triangulated across multiple sources, with no single source treated as determinative. Where information is incomplete, inconsistent or unavailable, this is treated as a finding relevant to visibility and accountability.

This approach ensures that assessments are grounded in:

- convergence across sources
- identifiable system features
- evidence of how systems operate in practice, rather than how they are intended to operate

The resulting analysis informs independent assessment and reporting. Engagement during the reporting period included Departments, Assembly Committees, statutory bodies, service providers, voluntary and community organisations, academic and research institutions, and autistic people and families.



SCRUTINY STRAND THREE – EXAMINATION

The Autism Reviewer applies independent scrutiny to examine how law, policy and services operate across government systems.

Examination is a structured process which:

- analyses evidence from multiple sources
- assesses whether statutory duties and policy commitments are realised in practice
- examines how systems interact and operate across organisational boundaries

This process focuses on how systems operate in practice, including areas where responsibility is shared, unclear or operates across interfaces between organisations.

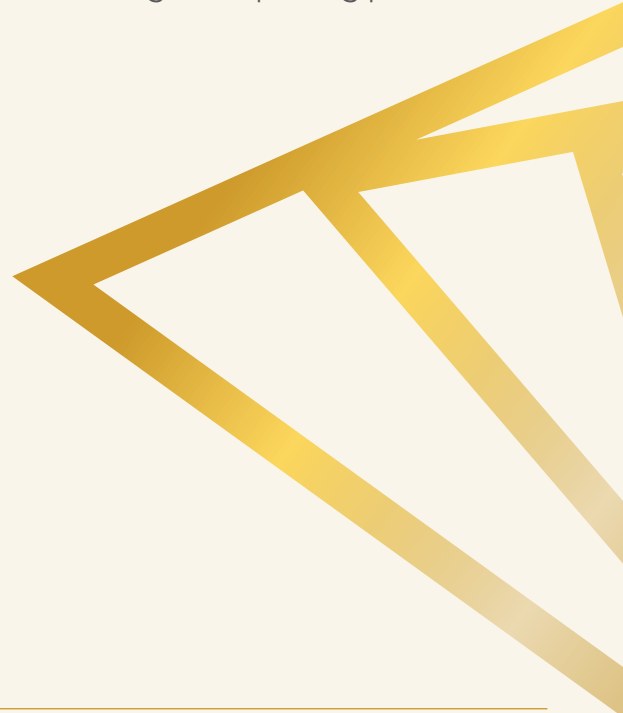
The Autism Reviewer forms independent, evidence-informed judgements based on the available evidence. These judgements are proportionate, transparent and grounded in the totality of the evidence analysed.

Examination has been applied across matters within the statutory remit, including implementation of the Autism Strategy, access to education and services, transition to adulthood and funding arrangements. The scope of examination is determined by the significance of the issue, the extent of system impact, and the availability of evidence.

Engagement with government departments, public bodies and other stakeholders informs this process by clarifying responsibilities, assessing available information and testing understanding of system operation.

This strand identifies issues of significance and informs the findings and themes presented to the Assembly.

Part Three sets out how this framework has been applied in practice during the reporting period.



PART THREE



SCRUTINY ACTIVITY

Independent Scrutiny in Action

During this first reporting period, the Autism Reviewer applied scrutiny across government systems through structured engagement, analysis of policy and legislation, consideration of lived experience and continuous monitoring of public and political developments.

This work brought areas of sustained systemic pressure into clearer view. These reflect recurring weaknesses in coordination, visibility and accountability across government, with direct implications for autistic people and their families.

This part of the report sets out:

- the areas examined through scrutiny
- the evidence brought into view
- the actions taken by the Autism Reviewer
- the issues brought into view
- the focus of ongoing scrutiny

Two Forms of Scrutiny

The Autism Reviewer has exercised two complementary forms of scrutiny:

A. Strategic scrutiny

Examines systemic issues where evidence indicates structural pressure, cross-departmental implications or weaknesses in the implementation of law, policy or services. These issues may involve cross-departmental responsibilities or system-wide interaction and, in some cases, require whole-of-government visibility and accountability.

B. Responsive scrutiny

Examines emerging developments requiring timely consideration as they arise through Assembly proceedings, policy reform, stakeholder engagement or operational practice.

Together, these approaches enable the Autism Reviewer to maintain oversight of both structural risks and real-time developments across the system.

Forms of Scrutiny in Practice

Strategic Scrutiny	Responsive Scrutiny
Examines systemic and structural pressures	Examines emerging issues and developments
Cross-departmental analysis	Targeted engagement and advisory input
Focus on accountability, coordination and reform	Focus on operational practice and policy direction



How Areas Were Identified and Brought Forward

The areas presented in this section were identified and brought forward for examination during the reporting period through an evidence-led and proportionate approach to the exercise of the Autism Reviewer's statutory functions.

How Scrutiny Activity Was Prioritised

Scrutiny Criterion	Application
Statutory Relevance	Alignment with the Autism Reviewer's functions under the Act
Strength of Evidence	Nature, strength and breadth of available evidence
System Risk and Pressure	Indications of systemic pressure, impact or inconsistency
System Significance	Extent of cross-departmental interaction or system-wide impact
Potential for Impact	Capacity of scrutiny to clarify responsibility, strengthen accountability or contribute to system improvement

The areas presented do not represent a hierarchy of importance. They reflect where the application of independent scrutiny could most effectively examine system operation and support accountability.

A. Strategic Scrutiny



Autism Strategy

Section	Content
Headline Insight	Current monitoring arrangements do not provide a reliable basis for assessing whether the Autism Strategy is delivered consistently across government.
Why This Area Was Examined	Effective monitoring is essential to transparency, accountability and credible cross-government delivery of the Autism Strategy.
What Scrutiny Identified	<p>Review of departmental monitoring reports identified systemic weaknesses, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• inconsistent definitions and measures• gaps and under-reporting• non-comparable reporting formats• limited data disaggregation• variable data quality <p>These weaknesses reduce the system's ability to demonstrate, credibly and consistently, whether delivery is improving.</p>
Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	<p>The Autism Reviewer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• issued a briefing to Executive Ministers, MLAs and MPs on requirements for effective final-phase delivery• developed an enhanced monitoring and reporting framework to improve consistency and transparency• provided analytical input to the draft Delivery Plan for 2025–2028• established departmental contact points across all Departments to support structured engagement and scrutiny
Assessment	Consistent cross-government monitoring requires clearer expectations for departmental reporting, stronger alignment between monitoring and delivery planning, and improved visibility of outcomes.
Next Phase of Scrutiny	This will remain a core focus of scrutiny, with ongoing assessment of progress in strengthening monitoring, improving comparability of reporting and increasing the visibility of outcomes in practice.

Adolescence to Adulthood Transition (age 14 to 25)

Section	Content
Headline Insight	Cross-government coordination of transition pathways into adulthood are not yet in place for autistic young people. Responsibilities, planning and outcomes remain fragmented across systems.
Why This Area Was Examined	<p>Transition to adulthood involves the transfer of responsibility from education to adult systems, including health and social care, employment and community provision.</p> <p>At this point, support arrangements can change simultaneously across systems.</p> <p>This pattern is consistently evidenced across research, policy analysis and lived experience.</p> <p>Without coordinated planning and cross-departmental accountability, this can result in a reduction in structured support.</p>
What Scrutiny Identified	<p>Scrutiny identified systemic issues affecting transition pathways, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unclear cross-departmental ownership of transition responsibilities • misalignment between education-based transition planning and adult service eligibility thresholds • limited visibility of post-school pathways across government • absence of consolidated data on outcomes for autistic young people after leaving school <p>These factors contribute to fragmented transition experiences and limit the ability to assess adequacy, equity and long-term outcomes.</p>
Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	<p>The Autism Reviewer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintained strategic oversight while allowing departmental reform activity to progress • engaged with relevant Departments and delivery partners across education, health and employment systems • reviewed research evidence, rights-based frameworks and lived experience insight relating to transition pathways • commissioned independent research to inform future scrutiny



Section	Content
Assessment	<p>A coherent cross-government transition pathway has not been established. Fragmentation across education, health, employment and social care systems continues to create complexity for autistic young people and their families.</p> <p>Evidence indicates that policy initiatives have not resolved these structural issues.</p> <p>A clear legislative framework is required to support defined cross-departmental responsibility, consistent monitoring and stronger accountability for outcomes.</p> <p>Without clear accountability structures, even well-intentioned policy initiatives risk remaining fragmented across Departments.</p>
Next Phase of Scrutiny	<p>Scrutiny will assess the extent to which transition pathways are clearly owned, coordinated and show evidence of improved outcomes over time.</p>

Restraint, Seclusion and Restrictive Practices

Section	Content
Headline Insight	Safeguards governing restraint, seclusion and restrictive practices are not consistently aligned across sectors in Northern Ireland.
Why This Area Was Examined	<p>Autistic people may encounter education, health and social care, and justice services across the course of their lives.</p> <p>A coherent, rights-based framework governing restrictive practices is therefore essential.</p> <p>This issue is consistently evidenced in research, oversight reports and lived experience, including disproportionate exposure to restrictive interventions for autistic people, particularly those with a co-occurring learning disability.</p> <p>Safeguards must operate consistently, transparently and in line with human rights standards across sectors.</p>
What Scrutiny Identified	<p>Initial scrutiny identified cross-sector issues affecting the governance and operation of restrictive practices, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differences in policy language and ambition between Departments, particularly regarding whether the objective is minimisation or elimination of restrictive practices • inconsistent monitoring and reporting arrangements across sectors • limited transparency and comparability of data relating to restrictive interventions • limited visibility of prevention-focused approaches, including workforce capability in de-escalation. Taken together, these findings indicate the absence of a fully aligned cross-sector framework governing restrictive practices.
Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	<p>The Autism Reviewer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • examined legislative authority, policy frameworks and governance arrangements across health, education and justice system • reviewed the Regional Policy on the Use of Restrictive Practices within health and social care and engaged with Trusts regarding implementation and oversight • analysis of draft statutory guidance on restraint and seclusion in educational settings • issued an Advisory Statement to Assembly Members clarifying the legal relationship between statutory guidance and the enabling powers within the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 • initiated engagement with Youth Justice Services regarding governance and incident review arrangements within secure settings



Section	Content
Assessment	<p>Safeguards governing restrictive practices are not operating within a consistently aligned legal and policy framework across sectors.</p> <p>Scrutiny identified a distinction between what may be achieved through statutory guidance and what requires amendment to primary legislation.</p> <p>Article 4(1)(c) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which permits the use of force to maintain “good order and discipline”, remains broadly framed and does not expressly reflect contemporary safeguarding and human rights standards.</p> <p>Statutory guidance may guide and structure how a statutory power is exercised, but it cannot amend or alter the scope of the enabling legislative provision itself, nor can it provide the same degree of legal certainty as primary legislation.</p> <p>Legislative clarity is required to support consistent safeguarding standards, transparent accountability and rights-aligned practice across sectors.</p>
Next Phase of Scrutiny	<p>Scrutiny will assess the extent to which legal frameworks are clear, safeguarding standards are consistent, and monitoring is transparent in practice.</p>

Barriers to Accessing Education

Section	Content
Headline Insight	Some autistic children are not consistently visible within the education system where barriers to attendance are experienced. This limits accountability for the delivery of their full educational entitlement
Why This Area Was Examined	<p>Access to education is not defined solely by the existence of a school place. It also includes safety, predictability and a sense of belonging within the school environment.</p> <p>Education reform activity is ongoing in Northern Ireland, including implementation education and special educational needs reforms, expansion of specialist provision and development of enhanced support models.</p> <p>The effectiveness of these measures depends on visibility, coordination and clear accountability across the system.</p>
What Scrutiny Identified	<p>Scrutiny identified several structural pressures affecting access to education for autistic children and young people, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capacity pressures within schools • workforce shortages • limitations within the school estate • variability in school ethos and inclusive practice • procedural complexity across the system • increasing levels of identified need <p>These pressures operate collectively and can interact to create barriers to participation.</p> <p>Some children are not consistently visible within the education system, including those who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enrolled but experiencing persistent attendance barriers • placed on reduced timetables for extended periods • educated through arrangements that continue beyond their intended duration • waiting for placement or moving between settings • experiencing distress-related barriers to attendance <p>Reduced timetables may be lawful where time-limited and regularly reviewed. Concern arises where children remain outside full-time education because needs are not adequately met.</p> <p>Without clear reporting arrangements and defined oversight responsibility, it is not possible to be confident that all children are receiving their full educational provision.</p>



Section	Content
	<p>Scrutiny further identified that placement availability alone does not determine educational experience. School leadership, culture, workforce capability and inclusive practice influence whether children are able to participate safely and consistently.</p> <p>Access to education is also shaped by factors beyond the education system, including health services, transport provision and social care. These interdependencies can create barriers where systems do not operate in a coordinated way.</p>
Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	<p>The Autism Reviewer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• provided formal evidence to the Education Committee• engaged with officials, families, advocacy organisations and school leaders• contributed publicly to support evidence-informed discussion and challenge narratives attributing system pressures to families rather than to system operation• commissioned independent research examining barriers to accessing education for autistic children and young people• joined the Expert Advisory Group supporting the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People’s Rights-Based Review of School Attendance
Assessment	<p>Barriers to accessing education arise from the interaction of multiple pressures across the system rather than from a single policy issue.</p> <p>Visibility of children within the system, clarity of oversight responsibility and coordination across education, health and support services are not consistently established.</p> <p>Where visibility is limited and responsibility is not clearly defined, accountability for educational provision is reduced.</p>
Next Phase of Scrutiny	<p>Scrutiny will assess the extent to which children experiencing barriers to attendance are visible within the system, responsibility is clearly defined, and coordination supports access to education in practice.</p>

Respite, short-breaks and residential provision for autistic people

Section	Content
Headline Insight	<p>Respite and short-break provision for children with complex needs remains fragile despite recent investment.</p> <p>System stability and support for families are not yet consistently secured.</p>
Why This Area Was Examined	<p>Respite and short-break services play a critical role in sustaining family stability and preventing escalation to crisis or residential care.</p> <p>Where these services are not available or reliable, pressures intensify across families and public services.</p> <p>This area has been the subject of sustained Assembly scrutiny, departmental reporting and public concern, including significant recent investment intended to address system pressures.</p>
What Scrutiny Identified	<p>Scrutiny identified ongoing structural pressures within respite and short-break provision, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • displacement within the system, including use of short-break beds for longer-term residential placements • workforce shortages affecting delivery and capacity across Trusts • limited transparency linking funding allocation to measurable outcomes for families with the most complex needs <p>Evidence indicates movement in some indicators, including reductions in waiting lists for residential short breaks and increases in provision. However, these changes have not resolved underlying system fragility.</p> <p>Scrutiny further identified that respite provision operates within a wider system context. Transition pathways, workforce capacity and residential infrastructure beyond the age of nineteen influence the stability of provision.</p> <p>Without coordinated system oversight, pressures may shift rather than resolve.</p>
Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	<p>The Autism Reviewer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintained a structured watching brief to support evidence-based assessment of system change • engaged with families and carers to understand lived experience of unmet need • monitored Assembly proceedings and departmental reporting • provided evidence to the Committee for Health, emphasising the role of respite provision in preventing escalation and sustaining family stability



Section	Content
Assessment	<p>Recent investment has increased activity within the system but has not yet secured consistent stability in respite and short-break provision.</p> <p>Where systems operate under sustained pressure, increased activity alone does not ensure durable improvement.</p> <p>Transparency, system learning and clear accountability for outcomes are not yet consistently established.</p>
Next Phase of Scrutiny	<p>Scrutiny will assess the extent to which provision demonstrates stability and transparency, and whether outcomes for families are reported and visible over time.</p>

B. Responsive Scrutiny



Emerging Issues

Alongside sustained examination of structural issues, the Autism Reviewer applied responsive scrutiny to emerging matters of significance during the reporting period.

These matters arose through Assembly proceedings, policy reform, stakeholder engagement and operational developments across public services.

Responsive scrutiny examines emerging risks, informs timely engagement and ensures that issues affecting statutory duties and system operation receive early and proportionate attention.

The examples below illustrate how responsive scrutiny was applied in practice.

Responsive Scrutiny in Action

Area	Issue Identified	Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	Implication / Effect
SEN Placements and Provision	Developments in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS) and wider pressures within the SEN system raised issues relating to placement capacity, planning and parental confidence.	Provided oral and written evidence to the Education Committee inquiry into SEN provision. Engaged with officials, schools and families to examine how placement decisions affect children's educational experience.	Clarified the relationship between statutory duties, placement decisions and lived experience. Supported Committee scrutiny of system pressures and reform proposals.
Emergency and First Responder Services	Communication differences and vulnerability recognition in policing and emergency response settings raised questions regarding operational practice and training.	Engaged with PSNI leadership, visited the Police College and observed elements of the Student Officer Programme. Provided advisory input to the PSNI Director of Training on communication competence and proportionate adjustments. Engaged with NIAS and NIFRS on training and operational practice.	Positioned communication competence as a core component of safe and lawful operational practice. Reinforced the role of training in supporting effective response.

Area	Issue Identified	Action Taken by the Autism Reviewer	Implication / Effect
School Attendance Enforcement	The prosecution of parents for school non-attendance raised concerns due to the disproportionate representation of autistic pupils experiencing attendance difficulties.	Reviewed the statutory framework governing parental prosecution powers and issued a report to the Education Authority for Northern Ireland.	Analysis informed Education Committee scrutiny and prompted commitments from EANI to review aspects of practice and oversight. Strengthened transparency around the exercise of statutory prosecution powers.
Early Intervention Policy Developments	Emerging policy initiatives sought to introduce earlier needs-led support for children experiencing emotional health needs or neurodevelopmental differences.	Engaged with Department officials to examine alignment with diagnostic pathways and system coordination, including the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework and the CAWT PEACEPLUS EASY Project. Sought assurance that needs-led support models operate alongside, not in place of, appropriate diagnostic pathways.	Reinforced the importance of aligning early intervention initiatives with diagnostic pathways, outcome measurement and cross-departmental coordination.
Health and Social Care Workforce Training	New autism and neurodiversity awareness training was introduced across the health and social care system.	Reviewed the training materials during development and provided a written report examining accuracy, safeguarding implications and consistency with a neurodiversity-affirming approach.	Strengthened the quality and clarity of training materials and reinforced the importance of workforce capability in supporting safe, respectful service delivery.

These examples demonstrate the application of responsive scrutiny to emerging issues affecting the operation of law, policy and services across public systems.

Responsive scrutiny supports early identification of issues, informs timely engagement and strengthens accountability within the statutory framework.



System Features

The areas set out above demonstrate how independent scrutiny operates. Across these areas, consistent patterns in system operation are evident.

The Autism Reviewer's independent scrutiny has identified that where delivery depends on coordinated action across government, the conditions required for consistent and demonstrable delivery are not always secured.

This is reflected in four recurring system features:

First, responsibility is frequently shared across Departments but not consistently defined, held or exercised in a coordinated way.

Second, monitoring and reporting arrangements are not consistently aligned or comparable, limiting the ability to assess delivery clearly across systems.

Third, variation across sectors affects the consistency with which statutory duties are understood and applied.

Fourth, it is not always possible to demonstrate clearly how delivery is experienced in practice or what outcomes are being achieved.

Understanding of autism across Northern Ireland is not yet consistently developed or applied across public services, support systems and wider society, resulting in variability in how needs are understood, support is designed and statutory duties are delivered.

Strong and inclusive practice exists, but it is not consistently embedded. This constrains the system's ability to respond coherently to the breadth and diversity of Northern Ireland's autistic population.

PART FOUR



IMPACT AND NEXT PHASE

Impact and Next Phase

Over the reporting period, scrutiny has been applied across legislative, policy and operational contexts, bringing system-level issues into view in support of accountability to the Assembly.

The primary effect of this work to date is increased visibility of how systems operate in practice, providing a clearer basis for examining delivery and accountability across government.

Accountability cannot operate where system operation cannot be clearly seen.

Impact

What difference has the work of the Autism Reviewer made to the operation and examination of government systems relating to autism?

Area of Impact	What the Autism Reviewer Has Done	System Effect
Establishing independent scrutiny	Established the Office, governance arrangements and core operating model; developed and implemented an oversight and scrutiny framework; built institutional capacity.	The Autism Reviewer’s independent scrutiny is now a functioning part of the public accountability system.
Defining a scrutiny model	Developed and applied a structured model based on capacity, evidence and examination; established a defined approach to the application of scrutiny.	Scrutiny is applied in a structured way across the areas examined, using a defined approach designed to support consistency.
Building the evidence	Gathered and analysed information from multiple sources, including lived experience, departments, research and operational data; commissioned independent research.	Analysis supports independent scrutiny and informs assessment.
Examining system operation	Applied scrutiny across Autism Strategy delivery, transition (14–25), restrictive practices, education access and respite provision.	System operation is more clearly evidenced across the areas examined, including aspects of how Departments interact and how delivery functions.

Area of Impact	What the Autism Reviewer Has Done	System Effect
Identifying system-level issues	Identified recurring patterns including unclear responsibility, inconsistent monitoring, variation in frameworks and limited outcome visibility.	Key system weaknesses have been identified and set out through cross-government scrutiny.
Clarifying responsibility	Examined how responsibility is shared and exercised across departments and services.	Scrutiny has provided evidence on how responsibility is defined and exercised across the areas examined, including where it remains shared, unclear or inconsistently applied.
Enabling cross-government accountability	Connected evidence across departments; identified cross-cutting issues; brought these into Assembly and public view.	Fragmented issues have been brought together and set out as system-level matters for Assembly scrutiny.
Supporting Assembly scrutiny	Provided oral and written evidence, briefings and advisory input to Committees, Ministers and MLAs; contributed to consultations and inquiries.	Provided evidence, analysis and clarification to support Assembly scrutiny of statutory duties and system pressures.
Engaging across public services	Established contact points across departments; engaged with Health and Social Care, Education, and emergency services; examined training and operational practice.	Scrutiny draws on evidence from multiple public service settings, reflecting how systems operate across the areas examined.
Applying responsive scrutiny	Examined emerging issues including SEN pressures, attendance enforcement, workforce training and emergency service practice.	Scrutiny is responsive and supports timely examination of system operation.
Strengthening monitoring and accountability	Designed an enhanced monitoring and reporting framework for the Autism Strategy; proposed improvements to data consistency and reporting.	A foundation has been established for more consistent, comparable and meaningful assessment of system performance over time.
Maintaining continuous oversight	Maintained oversight across policy, legislation, funding and delivery; operated a watching brief on system pressures.	Scrutiny is maintained across multiple areas of system activity, rather than being episodic
Clarifying the role of scrutiny	Established the distinction between scrutiny and delivery; positioned the role within the accountability system; reported formally to the Assembly.	The function and limits of independent scrutiny are more clearly set out within the public system.



This assessment is based on the evidence available during the reporting period and does not represent a complete analysis of all aspects of the system. In some areas, limitations in data, access and system complexity remain.

The Autism Reviewer is responsible for the exercise of independent scrutiny. Responsibility for system delivery and outcomes rests with the Departments and public bodies.

The Cumulative Impact of Scrutiny

The impact of independent scrutiny is cumulative and develops over time. It strengthens understanding of system operation, reveals consistent patterns across areas, and provides a clearer basis on which delivery and responsibility can be examined.

It does not deliver immediate system change. Its role is to establish the conditions under which change becomes possible and accountability becomes meaningful.

NEXT PHASE OF SCRUTINY

Statutory and Strategic Focus

The next phase of scrutiny will build directly on the evidence and findings in this report.

The focus, sequencing and depth of scrutiny will continue to be determined independently, with priority given to areas where statutory duties, public responsibilities and system performance require more precise examination in practice.

Scrutiny will be structured across four strategic areas, reflecting the evidence established to date:

Strategic Areas of Scrutiny

1. Coherence of cross-government delivery
2. Visibility, monitoring and accountability
3. Legal clarity, safeguards and rights-based practice
4. Access, equity and system capacity

Across these Strategic Areas the Autism Reviewer will apply targeted and sustained scrutiny through two defined core areas:

Core Area of Legal Scrutiny	Core Area of Delivery Scrutiny
<p>Autism Act</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how statutory duties are understood and realised in practice • where responsibility sits • where accountability remains unclear 	<p>Autism Strategy Delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitoring and reporting consistency • clarity of responsibility • visibility of outcomes in practice

Cross-Cutting Focus: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Across all areas, scrutiny will examine the impact of system operation on mental health and wellbeing. This reflects the central issue identified in this report: where delivery is not consistent in practice, the consequences are experienced directly by autistic people, their families and carers.

Evidence indicates that fragmentation, delay and uncertainty are not neutral. This includes waiting times for assessment, delays in accessing support, and variability in the availability of timely and appropriate services.

These conditions are associated with direct and cumulative adverse effects on mental health, wellbeing and day-to day stability.

Scrutiny will examine how system operation contributes to these effects.

Responsive Scrutiny of Emerging Issues

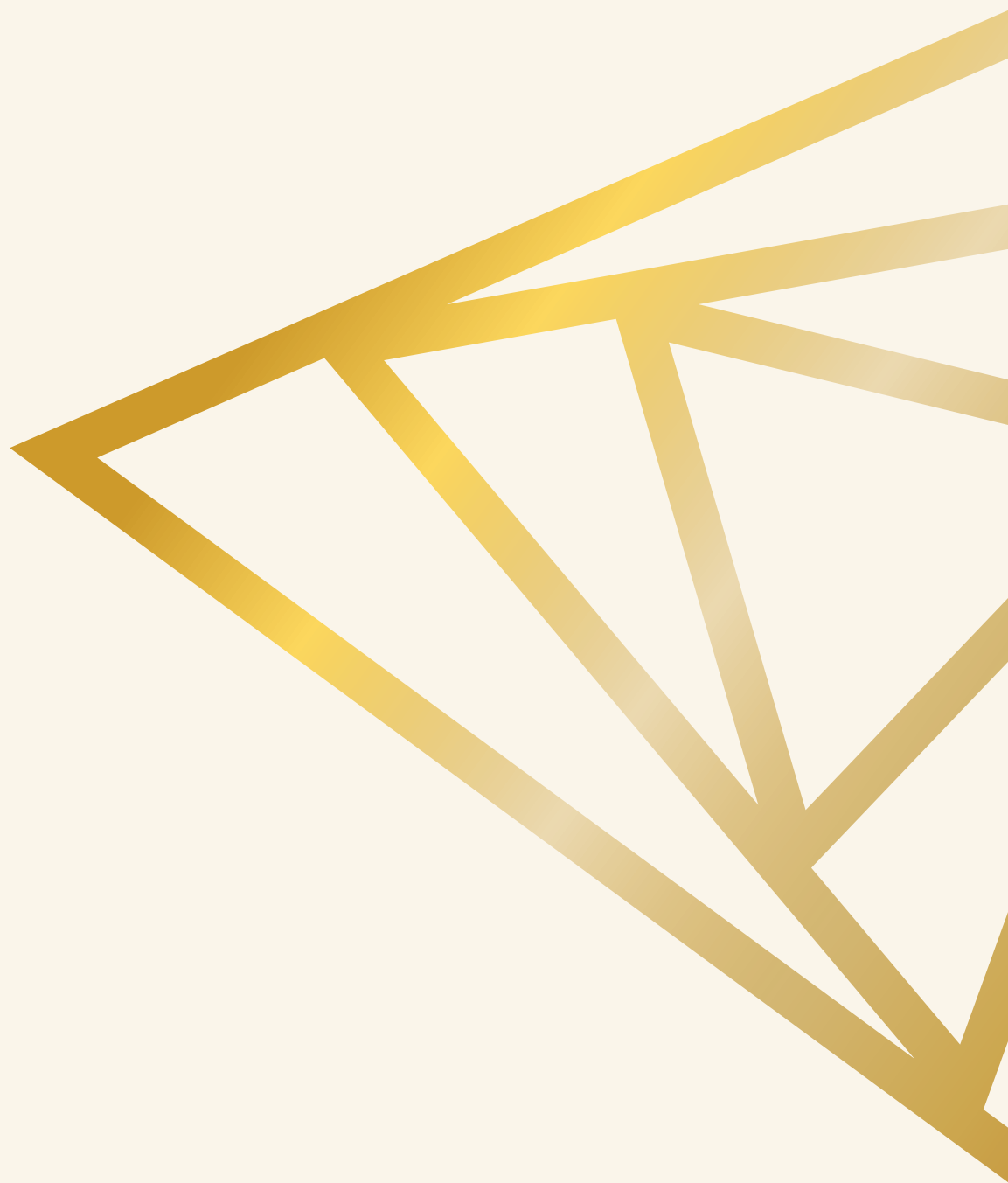
Scrutiny will continue to respond to emerging issues in a timely and proportionate way, ensuring that matters affecting delivery, rights and system operation are identified and examined as they arise.

Closing Position

The Autism Reviewer’s assessment is unequivocal: despite a statutory framework and successive strategies, delivery is not yet reliable in practice.

That must now change.

Clear ownership. Coordinated delivery. Measurable progress. Accountability actively exercised.



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