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To: The Mayor and Each Member of Limerick City and County Council

Progress Report on Working towards an Autism-friendly Limerick (For Noting)

A Notice of Motion that a Working Group be established to make Limerick an Autism Friendly location was referred from the Metropolitan District Meeting to the Community, Leisure and Culture Strategic Policy Committee. The Notice of Motion was considered by the Strategic Policy Committee and in February 2021, it was agreed by the members that a Working Group be established to consider the issue. The Working Group was chaired by Councillor Kieran O'Hanlon.

The Working Group proposed that Limerick City and County Council aim to make the Council an autism-friendly organisation and lead by example. Subsequently, Limerick City and County Council was awarded grant funding under the Disability Participation and Awareness Fund of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY for a programme of activities to support an autism-friendly Limerick. A progress report on this initiative for information of Council Members is attached, for noting.

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Stephane Duclot

Director of Service - Rural Community and Culture Development

Progress Report on Working towards an Autism-Friendly Limerick

This report presents the position on the project, initiated by the Community Culture and Leisure Strategic Policy Committee (SPC), to work towards an autism-friendly Limerick. The SPC have been involved in progressing the work within the Local Authority to raise awareness of autism and to support the work of the Local Authority in this regard.

The Paper outlined below presents information on recent developments in the national policy context including the findings of a Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism and of the consultation process completed to inform the preparation of a National Autism Innovation Strategy (2023).

It also presents the local context of this initiative, led by Limerick City and County Council, and the work progressed to date by the project supported by grant funding to the Council from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). The Paper concludes with suggested next steps on this initiative which will aim to develop the Local Authority's strategy and policy statement on making Limerick autism-friendly.

1. Context: The National Policy Setting

Autistic persons are a group that face specific barriers and challenges which impact on them in living full and productive lives and feeling included in community and society. Autism is experienced in different ways by autistic individuals and their families. Certain stereotypes on autistic persons are prevalent in society and a greater understanding of autism in the general population is needed.

Generally, there is growing awareness of autism in Irish society and in the political and policy arena. Advocacy organisations at national and local level and autistic persons and their families are looking for change in legislation, in policy and in service delivery to address the current barriers and challenges faced. This is driven by a rights-based approach and empowerment of autistic persons.

1.1 National Policy Initiatives on Autism

Most recent initiatives at national level include:

- **A Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism**, with a Final Report issued in June 2023 presenting 107 recommendations.
- **Autism Innovation Strategy: Analysis of Initial Public Consultation Submissions April 2023, Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth**. Fifty-one submissions were analysed of which just under 60% were from autistic and neuro-divergent people themselves (39%) or from parents of such people (18%), 19% from professionals, primarily working in education and health sectors, 5% from Disability Organisations, 4% from statutory agencies and the remainder (15%) from other sources.

- The aim is to prepare a national ***Autism Innovation Strategy*** that will identify unique challenges and barriers faced by autistic and neuro-divergent people and ways to address them. The national strategy is expected to be published in 2024, but is not available as yet. The Strategy will focus on specific areas that may not be addressed by broader disability policy frameworks, such as the *National Disability Inclusion Strategy* or the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities*. In 2017, the National Disability Authority (NDA), undertook a study to identify models of good practice that are effective in supporting the needs of people adults with autism, drawing on evidence from Ireland and abroad.¹ This was an additional action within the *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*. The more recent government initiatives have built on this.

The main issues identified from recent national policy documents are as follows:

- The language preference is for identity as ‘autistic person’ (known as identity-first language) rather than ‘a person with autism’.
- Autistic people are a heterogeneous group. It was estimated that some 50% of autistic adults have a concurrent intellectual disability (ID) and require life-long supports provided by Intellectual Disability Services. Of the remaining 50%, some achieve professional qualifications, employment and may have little need for support services with others struggle with education, finding employment and have social and health care needs that are frequently not met (National Disability Authority, 2017).
- The aspiration for autistic people is to live in a country where they do not have to advocate to have the same opportunities as everyone else. There are a range of barriers and challenges they experience in their daily lives. The main ones identified are:
 - Lack of alternative communications and forms of communication for all non-verbal or minimally speaking autistic people.
 - Lack of appropriate education and/or access to education including insufficient specialist places/classes in primary and secondary schools for children, long waiting lists, lack of inclusive summer programmes, lack of training for teachers and support staff.
 - Lack of employment opportunities which has a major impact on income adequacy for autistic people. These difficulties include lack of pathways out of education into work for autistic young persons and lack of employment-friendly work practices on the part of employers.
 - Lack of access to health services and supports. This includes lack of access to assessments, long waiting lists, inadequate provision and lack of services (occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, mental health,

¹ *Models of good practice in effectively supporting the needs of adults with autism, without a concurrent intellectual disability, living in the community*, NDA 2017

psychology etc.), lack of staff/resourcing in disability and health services and high costs for those persons with autism/their families who need to opt for private service provision for assessments and supports.

- Lack of understanding among members of the public in their attitudes towards autistic people. This can perpetuate negative stigma, characterising autistic identity as being one of 'deficit' rather than difference.
- Lack of data – i.e., not having actual numbers of autistic people at any given life stage (children, young persons, adults) - impacts on planning for services required and also creates barriers for autistic people in accessing the services they need.
- Suggestions were provided in submissions to the *National Autism Innovation Strategy* consultations on what can be done to address the needs/meet the challenges. While these suggestions spanned a range of different services, they mainly focused on education, employment and health. They included suggestions about access to assistive technology, community inclusion, building understanding of autism and adopting the approach of consultation and engagement with autistic people in designing interventions and services to address their needs.

1.2 Areas/Suggestions from National Consultations Relevant to Local Government

Drawing on work to date at national level on addressing barriers/challenges faced by autistic people, the following suggestions/areas of action are relevant to local government.

- ***Human Rights, Equality and Public Sector Duty:***
 - The overall local government framework should come from and align with a *National Autism Innovation Strategy* (forthcoming)
 - It is expected that a Local Authority's strategy on autism should be located within a human-rights framework and rights-based approach.
- ***Whole of government approach /cross-sectoral collaboration:***
 - As people with autism face a diversity of barriers/challenges, an effective strategy will require cross-sectoral collaboration. The *Joint Oireachtas Report on Autism*, in particular, highlighted the need for a whole of government approach, an urgent need for greater cross-departmental collaboration and joined-up service provision.
 - At local level, this role would be appropriate to the Local Authority.
- ***Environment, space and buildings and housing:***
 - Use the principle of Universal Design (in housing, recreation and play infrastructure, public buildings) and deliver adaptations to existing buildings/ space/infrastructure where possible so that they are accessible for autistic people.

- Conduct sensory audits of spaces to address the suitability of environments for autistic people.
- Add sensory areas and communication boards to all playgrounds.
- Develop “autistic parking space signs” in key locations (e.g., shopping areas, public buildings, schools).
- In relation to housing, actions recommended by the *Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism* include: Review the application processes for social housing and other housing supports to ensure that they are accessible to autistic people and disabled people; Ensure that autism is regarded as a sensory disability by all Local Authorities for the purposes of accessing prioritised social housing provision; Provide adequate grants to allow for sensory rooms to be added to homes and the sensory-proofing of homes for autistic people; Provide autism training to staff in Local Authorities and ensure that autism is accepted as a condition which qualifies for housing support, similar to disability in housing need assessment and adaptations.
- ***Communication:***
 - Use of new technology to help communication with autistic people including robust communication options such as high-tech AAC [Augmentative and Alternative Communication], ISL [Irish Sign Language] and spell to communicate with the use of a letter board.
- ***Consultation/engagement in policy:***
 - Engage directly with autistic groups and don’t just rely on autistic charities and service providers in assessing needs.
 - Build autistic representation from multiple sources to ensure that many autistic viewpoints and voices are heard and considered; and involve autistic people in policy making.
 - Build capacity of local government staff on accessible consultation processes with a particular focus on including autistic people in such consultations.
- ***Awareness/understanding of autism and training:***
 - Provide education to government/local government service providers on autism and training on how to connect, communicate [with] and support people with autism; offer the training on a recurring basis to account for staff turnover.
 - Involve autistic people in the delivery of such training.
 - Support local groups and organisations of autistic people to come together with local stakeholders of statutory and community-based organisations to deliver greater awareness-raising and inclusion at local level.
 - Use social media extensively to raise awareness of autism and promote positive stories around autism.

- ***Community development/inclusion:***

- Government grants for Sport Clubs and other community projects, of which many are delivered through local government, could include criteria on inclusion and specifically reference clubs'/organisation's policy regarding the support of special needs people in their activities.
- The network of *Connected Hubs* nationwide could champion/promote autism-friendly practices – for instance, by providing a silent room, access platforms within hubs that offer an open door and welcoming gateway for autism support groups, guardians and family supporters, children and young adults alike (submission to the *National Autism Innovation Strategy* consultation).
- Recognise the work of community groups who support autistic people by establishing a distinct funding stream to develop their work and to facilitate the establishment of new autism community groups across the country (recommendation of *Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism*).

- ***Employment***

- Review and provide training for HR staff in recruitment practices that support access of autistic people to job opportunities in the public sector (which includes local government). Example of actions include: Autism training to all public sector interviewers to address any biases against autistic people, to ensure equality of opportunity for employment; ensure that all environments where public sector employment processes are undertaken (interview offices, examination rooms, waiting rooms etc.) are autism-friendly; provide the option of remote job interviews by video call and other reasonable accommodations to prospective employees in the public sector.
- Promote access to employment and help autistic people to stay in employment by mandating (or promoting) working from home options, autism-friendly workplaces and part-time or reduced hours options. Offering flexibility regarding work systems would allow autistic people to better access supports and services.
- Promote and/or develop community-based work experience for autistic teens/young adults.
- Implement structured mentoring/job-coaching and supports for the person with autism in employment settings.

Such measures fit with local government's commitment to Public Sector Duty, equality and human rights including making reasonable accommodation to facilitate people with autism in the work environment.

- Other actions could include: expand awareness-raising activities, for instance, to run awareness courses for businesses to enhance local employment opportunities for autistic people.

The types of suggestions/areas for action identified above could form part of a policy approach led by the Local Authority to work towards an autism-friendly Limerick. A number of actions as suggested above have been taken by Limerick City and County Council in its initiative on autism. Some issues – such as “autistic parking space signs” in key locations – has been raised in the context of this project and as a more general question in Council meetings to the Executive on provision of accessible parking spaces in public areas. However, there is currently no road traffic legislation provided to regulate these courtesy accessible parking spaces in public areas (i.e. on street) and it would not be possible to implement and enforce them on street at present. In addition, it is considered that the primary focus should be on provision in car parks rather than on street parking zones.

2. Limerick City and County Council’s Autism-Friendly Project

Limerick City and County Council commenced a local project on autism in 2022, led by the *Community Cultural and Leisure Strategic Policy Committee (SPC)*.

2.1 Background

The Limerick Autism Friendly Project was initiated following a recommendation from the *Community Cultural and Leisure Strategic Policy Committee (SPC)*. A Working Group was established to consider the recommendation. Its membership included specialist autism service providers, charities and some SPC members. The findings concluded that Limerick City and County Council (LCCC) should take the lead in the promotion and development of Limerick as an **Autism-Friendly** location.

Following from this, LCCC was successful in its application for funding under the *Disability Participation and Awareness Fund* from the *Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)* (€75,000) to develop Limerick as an autism-friendly location.

The project, now nearing completion, aims to build capacity of the Local Authority and local community, voluntary and other organisations to address the barriers to participation faced by autistic persons and their families.

2.2 Actions Completed / In Progress

With the grant funding from DCEDIY and additional own Council resources, the following actions were completed or are currently in progress.

Training:

The Human Resources (HR) Department of Limerick City and County Council invited companies to tender for delivery of a training programme on Autism Awareness to Local Authority staff, Elected Members and community groups. The contract was awarded to *Ability Focus*. Training was provided by this organisation, beginning in December 2022. The training programme involved two elements: Initial Training and Follow-Up Training. Initial Training was offered to staff across all departments and Elected Members, and later to members of the Public Participation Network (PPN).

The Initial Training was of one-hour duration delivered online. It was tailored to suit the participants within the group. With Local Authority staff, it was based around the work place while training for community group members was based around inclusion within the community setting.

The training was structured as follows:

- Initial Training covering: 'Support and Inclusive Communication', broken into three sections: Section 1 – An Introduction to Neurodiversity & Autism, Section 2 – Autism: Key Learning and Section 3 – Supporting Autism in your organisation.
- Sessions of Follow-up Training were offered to staff and Elected Members that had completed the Initial Training. This additional training was more focused on Local Authority actions including: key service interaction points, Council designs covering autism-friendly designs, buildings, playgrounds and outside space design, website design for communications and advice on interviewing autistic people.

The breakdown of training attendance is as follows:

	Staff	Elected Members	PPN
Initial Training	255	10	60
Follow-up Training	42	3	

Twenty-six sessions were delivered with a further four (4) sessions to take place at a later stage this year. One of the four sessions has been allocated to the *Limerick Comhairle Na nÓg* with the date to be finalised with their co-ordinator.

Feedback on the training has been very positive, with people commenting on how informative the training was and how easy it was to make changes in everyday roles to be more inclusive and considerate of others with the focus on autistic persons and their families.

Sensory Equipment

As part of the Project, the Local Authority identified a number of spaces in its various public offices and services areas and installed or are examining the feasibility of the installation of sensory equipment. This element of the project aims to make public buildings more user-friendly for autistic persons, in areas where the public come in to use a particular Council service.

- Wall panels were procured from Sensory House and ordered for each area offices. These have been delivered to City Hall and installation in the various offices is being planned. The specific areas within the buildings chosen for the installations are: meeting rooms in City Hall, County Hall and Rathkeale Municipal Offices and in the lobbies of both Municipal offices in Kilmallock and Newcastle West. The panels have been delivered to Kilmallock Municipal Office and library for installation, with the other offices to follow. Sensory wall panels help reduce anxiety, provide a distraction and can be calming.
- LED Waterless tubes, procured from Total Sensory Ltd., have been delivered to three locations, City Hall, County Hall and Rathkeale Municipal offices. Colour

tubes are a key piece of sensory equipment as they can be calming and soothing to those with sensory needs. Similar to the Wall Panels, these are for installation in meeting rooms as a calming instrument for those visitors/customers to the office with a sensory need (e.g., child with an adult customer). Waterless tubes were chosen rather than a bubble tube as waterless tubes are low maintenance, (Bubble tubes need to be refilled and changed periodically).

The Library Services were allocated funding from the DCEDIY grant to purchase equipment for their branches that support access to their services by autistic people. Some examples of equipment purchased are: sensory mood light tables (2), dark dens (3), liquid floor tiles and numerous fidget toys and sets.

At a community level, the Council engaged with West Limerick Resources who had initiated Autism Friendly activities in west Limerick. Funding was provided to West Limerick Resources to purchase a sensory room package for St. Ita's Hall (community centre), Abbeyfeale to facilitate/support access by autistic persons.

LCCC Festivals and Events:

Funding has been provided by Tourism, Festivals and Events during *St. Patrick's Festival* weekend including *The International Band Championship* and during *Riverfest* towards the cost of provision for an area designated as an Autism-friendly space in conjunction with ASD Ireland. A new bespoke mobile ASD Unit was used for the first time at St. Patrick's Festival weekend in 2024.

DOCHAS 'Employment and Wellbeing Project'

Funding to DOCHAS was used to hire a co-ordinator for the café in the DOCHAS centre on Parnell Street. The purpose of the funding was to help train service members in work skills and support them to apply for mainstream employment in the hospitality and catering/services industry.

2.3 Conclusion

With a national *Autism Innovation Strategy* in preparation and publication expected in 2024, the Limerick Autism-Friendly Project and other preparatory actions have created an excellent foundation to develop a Local-Authority led strategy in this area for Limerick. It is proposed to await publication of the national strategy and any direction/guidance for local government within that strategy in advance of preparing a policy approach or overall autism-friendly strategy for Limerick City and County. In view of the wide scope of potential measures and resource constraints, it may be appropriate to roll out a programme on a phased and targeted basis – e.g., selected geographic areas such as the city centre or selected towns initially, priority types of measures and structures and processes for engagement with autistic people and relevant stakeholders.

Many of the types of actions proposed in the consultation process for the national *Autism Innovation Strategy* and recommendations of the *Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism* have been piloted in Limerick. Some have been delivered (training, sensory equipment, adaptions to space and buildings, special measures at festivals and events, playground communication

boards, funding supports to community groups/organisations for autism-friendly local initiatives) over the last two years or are in progress or planned. Other measures are being explored.

The approach proposed at national level - cross-sectoral coordination, promotion of joined up service provision - is a good fit to the role of the Local Authority in any local strategy and service coordination to roll out an autism-friendly Limerick. The rights-based approach, inclusive engagement of autistic people in consultation on plans and service design and application of public sector duty are well-aligned to Limerick City and County Council's overarching plans and in local community development.

Application of Universal Design principles in planning and “disability-proofing” buildings, space and public infrastructures by local government will help to improve accessibility of the built and recreation environment for autistic people. Policy positions in relation to housing need assessment and adaptations, as they apply to autistic people, will need to be explored with the relevant services in the Council. Generally, any direction here should follow the national level position on these issues.