



The [Royal College of Occupational Therapists](https://www.rcot.org.uk) (RCOT) is the professional body for occupational therapy representing over 33,500 occupational therapists across the UK. There are 1,299 RCOT members in Northern Ireland (RCOT, February 2020). Occupational therapists in Northern Ireland work in trusts, across health and social care services, they deliver services across housing, schools, prisons, the voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

Occupational therapists work with people of all ages, who are experiencing difficulties through injury, illness or disability or a major life change. Occupational therapists consider the relationship between what a **person** does every day (**occupations**), how illness or disability impacts upon the person and how a person's **environment** supports or hinders their activity (PEO Model). Using this approach, we help people to continue or re-engage with participating fully in daily life, including work, social activities and maintaining roles and responsibilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Autism Private Member's Bill. Please find below comments from RCOT.

General comments:

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) supports the need to monitor the impact of autism legislation on the lives of people with autism in Northern Ireland. The College is, however, concerned that focusing on one diagnosis will have unintended consequences for people who have similar needs but fall into the wider diagnostic category of neurodiversity.

The College believes that equality of access to occupational therapy should be a guiding principle for everyone, and that access to occupational therapy should be person-centred and based on occupational need rather than diagnosis. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities they want, need or are expected to engage in, including work, social activities and maintaining roles and responsibilities. Occupational therapists have the skills and expertise to enable people with autism to lead healthy and productive lives but occupational therapy is a limited resource and focusing on one population will impact on other peoples' opportunities to benefit from that expertise.

Background information

There are 1,557 registered occupational therapists in Northern Ireland (HCPC Feb 2020) working across health, social care, education, the voluntary sector and in other specialist areas.

Occupational therapy is a science-based, person-centred profession, concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation. Occupational therapists work with people of all ages who are experiencing difficulties through injury, illness or disability or a major life change.

Occupational therapists have been identified as key members of specialist autism teams for adults (NICE 2016) and it is recommended that children should have access to an occupational therapist if one is not included as a core member of their local autism team (NICE 2017).

As members of these teams, occupational therapists contribute to the early identification, diagnosis (where appropriate) and participation of autistic people in activities that are



important to them. We enable people's participation and occupational performance by working directly with individuals and indirectly through consultation and collaboration with family members, communities, teachers, employers and other professionals. Occupational therapists identify individual's strengths and abilities as well as the needs and challenges that hinder their participation in meaningful activities. Occupational therapists choose the most appropriate setting in which to work with people with autism, for example at home, in their workplace, at school/nursery/college, in residential settings and at diagnostic / assessment centres.

Responses to survey questions

Q4) RCOT welcomes the suggestion that government departments should work together to enhance services for people who need support because of their neurodiversity. However, ring-fencing a budget based on the prevalence rate of autism could have unintended consequences for people who are otherwise neurodiverse, for example those with developmental coordination disorder/dyspraxia (which affects around 5% of the population, Lingam et al 2009) and ADHD (which affects around 5% of the population, NICE 2018). RCOT supports however, the recommendation for cross-departmental collaboration as autism is a life-long condition and affects all areas of life.

Q7)

a) RCOT supports the call for a consistent multi-agency early intervention service across HSC Trusts, developed and delivered in partnership with third sector organisations. It is important however, that early intervention services seek to support and identify people with a range of neurodevelopmental conditions (including autism, DCD, ADHD) because they frequently overlap. People often present with complex needs and occupational therapists rarely work with individuals who fit into neat diagnostic categories. Having a consistent approach/pathway across Trusts would reduce the confusion and delay accessing diagnostic assessments and support frequently reported by neurodiverse people and their families.

b) RCOT supports the need for support for services to support autistic adults and adults who are otherwise neurodiverse. Occupational therapists have the skills and expertise to support adults whose participation in daily life activities (including employment, education, social and leisure activities) is affected by factors such as their neurodiversity. Occupational therapists focus on health and well-being; they do not try to fix or cure the problem, but endeavour to fix 'what matters to the person'. Working across health, education, employment, social care and the third sector, and addressing both physical and mental health positions occupational therapists well to support neurodiverse adults including those with autism.

c) RCOT supports the recommendation for a single point of access for information about autism services. This should be developed with input from HSC Trusts and other relevant organisations to ensure that information is accurate and coordinated.

Q8) RCOT supports the provision of training for staff in all sectors (education, health, employment, social care) to raise awareness of autism and reasonable adjustments that support the performance, participation and well-being of autistic people. RCOT recommends however, that the training should cover neurodiversity more broadly (rather than focusing on one specific diagnosis) to include awareness/ approaches/adjustments that will benefit the whole neurodiverse community. Prioritising one group will disadvantage the others as staff can only allocate a limited



amount of time for training. Occupational therapists are skilled in developing and delivering such training, but believe this should be co-produced with people with lived experience.

Contact

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ⁱ Information from the Health Care Professions Council on the number of registrants in the Occupational Therapy profession in Northern Ireland