

Autism

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

I thank the hon. Lady and my colleague on the Health and Social Care Committee, who always brings such expertise and experience to these debates and to the Committee. Does she agree that it is not just the variation around autism, but the scale of that variation that is so striking? Children cannot access any of the other services that might be available without the initial diagnosis.

Lisa Cameron Shadow SNP Spokesperson (Mental Health)

That is an apt intervention, and I agree entirely. It is not just the postcode lottery, but the widespread variation right across the United Kingdom. Through the all-party group, we hear that people from different parts of the UK feel that they have to battle the system repeatedly at every stage. This is very important. In Health questions, I have asked the Secretary of State whether the Department might consider putting individuals who can diagnose autism into every child and adolescent mental health services team. I know that the Department is looking at data and waiting times. That is so important to getting some degree of stability in the services provided and to ensure that everyone has adequate access moving forward. Knowing where we are to start with can only be a good thing when we look at the progress being made.

As has been mentioned, autism spectrum disorder affects people across their lifespan, so it has to be at the core of policy across many Departments, including those responsible for education and community. This is also about our surgeries. I have taken on the excellent points made by Thangam Debbonaire and I will start my own such surgery in the near future. We have discussed it since our last debate on this subject and it is an excellent idea. I recommend that, as MPs, we all move forward in the same manner, walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

The management of our local shopping centres have been positive about having autism-friendly opening hours so that families can come at particular times. The setting will be made appropriate and people will feel included and relaxed when they go about their daily life. There is so much more to be done. On employment, the autism employment gap is so much higher than the disability employment gap. We must take that forward.