



## **IRELAND'S AUTISM CHARITY**

### **AsI Am's Submission to Department of Education and Youth on Guidance Counsellors**

AsI Am, Ireland's Autism Charity, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education and Youth's consultation on the provision of guidance counselling in schools. This consultation is an important opportunity to highlight the value of guidance counselling in our schools, as well as some of the gaps and missed opportunities within this area of our education system.

AsI Am recognises the important role Guidance Counsellors play in our school system in providing support to Autistic and non-Autistic students. A review of guidance counselling provision within our schools is welcome, particularly to evaluate how this role can be better tailored to supporting Autistic students. As part of our organisational strategic plan, AsI Am is committed to ensuring every Autistic child in Ireland has access to a school place that meets their needs and enables them to thrive, this includes having an inclusive guidance counselling experience within our school system.

#### **Who We Are**

AsI Am is Ireland's Autism Charity, we are dedicated to removing the invisible barriers often experienced by Autistic people and families, so that every Autistic person can enjoy the same chance in society. Our vision is for an Ireland to be a country where every Autistic person is accepted as they are. Our purpose is to create an inclusive society for Autistic person that is accessible, accepting and affirming. AsI Am are an Autistic-led organisation who is a Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO) and a member of the DPO Network.

#### **Context**

AsIAM engages with the Autistic community on a regular basis through our annual Same Chance Survey and consultations throughout the year. These engagements provide AsIAM with valuable insights which highlight the barriers experienced by the Autistic community. These barriers include gaps in Autistic student's experience of the guidance counselling system within our schools.

Our data and research below, evinces some of these gaps and barriers which feed into a broader concern, regarding Ireland's approach to building a more inclusive education system. If we are to build an inclusive education system, we must focus on a holistic approach to pedagogy and to our school's learning environment, which requires understanding and flexibility. This understanding and flexibility are currently not experienced by many of our Autistic students. In our annual [Same Chance Report](#) (2025), it showed that 70% of families do not believe the education system is inclusive of Autistic people. This lack of inclusion is particularly evident regarding Autistic students' engagement with guidance counselling services throughout our schools. Within our special schools, this inequality of access to this service is especially visible, with many of our special schools throughout the country having no access to guidance counselling service in place at all. This alone leaves an indelible mark on our approach to an inclusive education system. Autistic young people cannot make the same choices to go to university/work post-school and this highlights the cliff edge of supports families experience when Autistic people leave school.

If we are as a society to fully embrace Articles 24 and 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) our guidance counselling system must be reframed around a rights-based model, aligned with the UNCRPD. Ensuring every Autistic student is supported as equal participants, rather than “exceptions” within the system, and have the same right to make decisions about their future. This includes shifting mindsets from deficit-based narratives to strengths-based, identity-affirming approaches, as highlighted below.

- 86% of Autistic people represented in our *Same Chance Report (2025)* said they do not have the same chance in society. This covers a multitude of areas including education, social protection and employment etc. This stark statistic is also

compounded by the fact that over 80% of Autistic people are underemployed or unemployed in Irish society, which speaks to the scale of social exclusion faced by our community. This unacceptable feature of Irish society amplifies AsIAM's objectives in ensuring Autistic students feel fully supported as they navigate the school system. To enable this, Guidance Counsellors should be trained to challenge bias and ensure Autistic students are supported to pursue ambitious and meaningful pathways to support them as the journey through school life and enter the workforce.

- In 2023, AsIAM launched a research report entitled [\*Exploring the school experiences of Autistic Children and Young People\*](#) which was conducted by Dr Natalie Delimata & Dr Deirdre Byrne and funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Grant Scheme. This research gave voice to Autistic students' day-to-day experiences of the education system. A key issue identified in this research was the persistent gap between inclusive education policy and the lived reality of Autistic students in schools. While Ireland has made progress in promoting inclusion, many school environments remain insufficiently accessible to meet Autistic students' needs in practice. This disconnect places additional pressure on students to navigate systems that were not designed with them in mind, particularly during critical transition points, including moving from post-primary education to planning for further and higher education or alternative pathways. Guidance Counsellors are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap. However, to do so effectively, their role must be expanded and restructured to include proactive, individualised transition planning that recognises the specific barriers Autistic students face. Without this targeted support, students' risk being excluded not by policy, but by implementation failures.
- The report also highlights the significant impact of school experiences on Autistic students' emotional wellbeing. Many Autistic young people encounter barriers such as social isolation, bullying, and chronic stress, all of which can contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and burnout. Despite this, guidance counselling in many schools remains narrowly focused on academic achievement and career pathways, rather than adopting a holistic, wellbeing-centred approach. There is a

clear need to redefine the role of guidance counsellors to include ongoing emotional support, regular check-ins, and an informed understanding of Autistic experiences, such as masking and sensory overload. By embedding wellbeing into the core of guidance provision, schools can create safer, more supportive environments that enable Autistic students not only to succeed academically, but to feel genuinely included and understood.

- A further concern raised by our 2023 research is the lack of meaningful inclusion of Autistic students' voices, alongside inconsistent communication and collaboration with families. Autistic students are often excluded from decisions about their own educational and career pathways, particularly where communication methods are not adapted to meet their needs. At the same time, parents frequently report gaps in support and a lack of coordinated engagement with schools. Guidance counsellors could play a central role in addressing both of these issues by acting as a consistent point of contact between students, families, and the wider school system. This would involve adopting flexible and accessible communication approaches, actively seeking and valuing student input, and ensuring that guidance planning is genuinely collaborative. Strengthening these relationships would not only improve outcomes for Autistic students but also build greater trust and coherence within the support system.
- The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People aims to create an educational environment that ensures that disabled people, including Autistic people can work towards realising their career aspirations, on an equal basis with non-disabled people. This is fundamental if we are to see a change in Autistic student's experience of the education system. It was a very welcome step in Budget 2024 for Guidance Counsellors to be introduced in special schools for the first time through a pilot programme. This was a positive step towards giving students in special education settings the same chance to build and plan their futures. However, given that the number of Guidance Counsellors introduced in special schools was limited, it is imperative that all students have access to career guidance counselling, regardless of their school placement. Providing these resources can better support Autistic students as they transition to alternative pathways post-secondary school. The National Human Rights

Strategy for Disabled People in this light is crucial to ensuring any barriers that currently exist from accessing fully supported guidance counselling are removed.

- The Indecon Review of Career Guidance in 2019 recommended that a specific career guidance module for disabled children be developed and delivered as part of initial training for Guidance Counsellors. If implemented, this output would be a welcome and significant step in ensuring that when Guidance Counsellors are placed in schools, they have appropriate training to best support Autistic and disabled students. As this recommendation has not been implemented, many of our Autistic students are failed by this service within our schools. Furthermore, one of the strategic priorities set out in the now defunct Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 was the need to raise awareness of training and employment options for students with support needs. The Comprehensive Employment Strategy previously pointed out that *“better guidance on types of courses/ employment opportunities that are suited to particular conditions”* was needed and it was suggested that the general sense is that *“guidance is poorly tied to actual opportunities”*. A key theme set in the strategy was the importance of enhanced career advice from a younger age for people with a disability. Enhanced career advice for students in DEIS schools is also needed.
- Action 3.4 of the [National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance](#) outlined that the Department of Education would work to provide students with additional needs with access to *“person-centred opportunities such as work-shadowing/work-experience.”* On the pillar of *“Inclusive Learning and Education”*, the *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People* commits to *developing tailored guidance at all levels and in mainstream and special schools, with a focus on developing disabled students aspirations and addressing “diminished expectations”, while also supporting earlier transition planning for disabled people leaving school on post-school options, such as apprenticeships, employment and further and higher education.* This is particularly important in identifying alternative pathways to college/university for students who may wish to pursue such pathways.

- We also know that there are other barriers facing Autistic children accessing education. Such as a lack of inclusive school practises, lack of resources and support and a shortage of appropriate school places. Although these are not directly within the remit of Guidance Counsellors, they are important factors when considering the context that Guidance Counsellors are operating within. They are working with Autistic students who are facing inordinate barriers to supports in other areas across their school life, as such more consideration will be needed to Autistic students as they plan for their post-school life. Guidance Counselling should provide highly personalised planning that recognises that Autistic students may benefit from:
  - alternative progression routes such as post-leaving certificate courses.
  - supported employment pathways such as apprenticeships and internships.
  - delayed or non-linear transitions such as part time or online learning courses, short courses etc.
  - Guidance counsellors engaging proactively with Day Service Opportunity Officers which will improve support for Autistic people with an intellectual disability.

## **Recommendations**

- The Department of Education and Youth should ensure equitable access to guidance counselling for all students, including those in special schools. This should involve increasing the allocation of guidance counsellor posts so that every school has consistent provision, regardless of setting, ensuring no Autistic student is excluded from support due to school type.
- A mandatory, accredited autism-specific module should be embedded within both initial teacher education and continuous professional development for guidance counsellors, as recommended by the Indecon Review. This training should promote neuro-affirmative, strengths-based approaches, and equip

counsellors to understand Autistic experiences such as masking, communication differences, and burnout.

- Guidance counselling provision should be reframed beyond academic and career planning to include ongoing emotional and wellbeing support. This includes regular check-ins, early identification of stress and anxiety, and integrating wellbeing supports into guidance practices to better respond to the lived experiences of Autistic students.
- Guidance Counsellors should be resourced and required to provide proactive, individualised transition planning for Autistic students from an earlier stage in post-primary education. This planning should recognise diverse pathways, including further education, apprenticeships, supported employment, and non-linear progression routes, ensuring students are supported to pursue ambitious and meaningful futures.
- Schools should implement structured approaches to ensure Autistic students are actively involved in decisions about their educational and career pathways. Guidance Counsellors should also act as a central liaison between students, families, and external supports, using accessible communication methods and fostering collaborative planning processes.
- The Department should support stronger collaboration between Guidance Counsellors and external stakeholders, including employers, further education providers, and Day Service Opportunity Officers. Expanding access to work experience, job-shadowing, and real-world learning opportunities (as per national policy commitments) will help bridge the gap between education and employment.