



West Sussex Autism Partnership Board (APB)

Meeting: 24 March 2026, 11am – 1pm (Microsoft Teams)

Attendees:

Diana Bernhardt – Commissioning Service Manager (WSCC) Chair

Paige Maughan – Data and Information Officer (WSCC) Minutes

Gary Capelin – Peer Support Co-Ordinator (WSCC)

Katie Green – Access All Areas

Helen Coole – Parent carer, Reaching Families and SEDS Connectives

Sheryl Bunting – Carers Support West Sussex

Carol Edmunds – NHS, Lived Experience Advisory Panel

Lydia Taylor – Liaison Officer, Policy and Involvement (WSCC)

Jane Blackwell – Principal Librarian, SEND (WSCC)

Jayne Simpson – Parent carer

Tom Elsam – Lifelong Services Service Manager (WSCC)

Charlotte Smith - Contracts and Commissioning Manager SEND (WSCC)

Lauren Boal – Voice and Participation Officer (WSCC)

Graham Sargent – ASSA

Danny Gregory – Aspective

Victoria Littlejohn – ASSA

Apologies:

Catherine Pritchard – Integrated Care Board

Andrew Cole – Neurodevelopmental Service, NHS

Martin Ford – Aldingbourne LIMA Service

Jessica Bubb – Children, Young People and Learning (WSCC)

Guests:

Julie Phillips – Director of Adult Social Care Services (Improvement, Assurance and Principal Social Worker)

Welcome and Introductions

Last meeting notes

Agreed, no corrections. These will be uploaded to the website.

1. Matters arising

- Publish October minutes to WSCC website – **Completed**
- Recirculate email regarding the questionnaire – **Completed**
- Arrange informal introductory session for new members to meet existing APB members – **Completed**
- Provide information and feedback to Jo Baldwin about other groups and forums – **Ongoing. Gary will follow up**

2. Updates

Autism Assessment (NHS/Andrew Cole update)

Diana provided feedback on behalf of Andrew:

- Acknowledge there is a significant waiting list for autism assessments but there is no pause on autism diagnosis work.
- Waiting list being reviewed to confirm ongoing need for an assessment as people may be have arranged for this privately.

Sussex Partnership Foundation Trust (SPFT) attendance

- Andrew will continue to attend APB meetings as the representative for the neurodevelopmental service.

3. Terms of Reference (ToR)

Diana presented the latest ToR draft. Main points of discussion were mixed views on having a Lived Experience co-chair:

- Some members did not agree, expressing concern that a co-chair could be “favoured”, may represent a narrower band of lived experience and could unintentionally exclude those at different points on the spectrum.
- Others felt a co-chair would strengthen inclusivity, supported by clear selection processes and WSCC-provided support.
- Clarification was provided that:
 - The role is not decision-making; decisions remain collective.
 - The Learning Disability Partnership Board (LDPB) also has a paid co-chair which works well.
 - Members agreed the ToR can be approved apart from the co-chair section, as this requires further consideration by the board.

4. All Age Autism Strategy update

- Plans to present the strategy to the next Health and Wellbeing Board have been paused, as the council is about to enter the pre-election period, during which the strategy cannot be approved.
- The strategy is therefore on hold as it will need to be reconsidered by the new council administration.

5. Autism Awareness Month (April 2026)

Diana shared a draft flyer of planned activities for the month. **Action:** Diana will circulate the final version once event dates are confirmed.

Planned contributions include:

- Kit Messenger, Co-founder of Changing Chances Community Interest Company – good practice for employers.
- Julia Pascoe, Aldingbourne Trust – specialist employment services.
- Autism in Schools Project
- We are unable to use the month to promote the All Age Autism Strategy as publicity to launch the strategy will need to wait until it has been approved by the new administration.

Discussion points:

- Members queried whether “people with autism” language should be used, given there are different views amongst board members. It was confirmed that the board had agreed to use both terms i.e. people with autism and autistic people.

- Question about whether we can still run a public event to promote the All Age Autism Strategy when it is published. Confirmed that this is still the aim but is subject to the strategy being agreed by the new council administration late May.

6. Engagement and Involvement

Lydia Taylor presented an overview of the work that takes place in the Adults' Services Information and Involvement Team, WSCC.

Team members:

- James Ironside – Service Manager
- Lydia Taylor – Liaison Officer, Policy and Involvement
- Fung-Yee Hite – Liaison Officer, Information, Advice and Engagement
- Paige Maughan – Data and Information Officer
- Kiri Clevett – Administrator

Team overview:

- The team coordinates Adults' Services involvement groups:
 - Customer and Carer Group
 - Diverse Communities Inclusion and Insight Group
 - Learning Disability Partnership Board
 - Autism Partnership Board
- Leads on the services information and advice.

Key updates:

- Customer and Carer Conference 2026 follow-up session planned for 2 April.
- Involvement Insight report nearing completion.
- Development of a 2-year involvement and improvement action plan.
- Supporting wider equality, diversity and inclusion planning.

Some points of discussion:

- Slides will be recirculated following the meeting. Action: Gary.
- Invite for Customer and Carer Conference follow-up session to be circulated. Action: Lydia.
- Future Charing arrangements for administration of the meeting: These are being transferred to the Information and Involvement Team. Charing arrangements to be confirmed with James Ironside likely to be interim chair as Diana is leaving WSCC in July.

7. Lifelong Services Transformation Programme

Presented by Julie Phillips – Director of Adult Social Care Services (Improvement, Assurance and Principal Social Worker) and Programme Lead for Lifelong Services.

Key points:

- The Discovery Phase is underway to understand the current position and identify steps for service transformation.
- Currently looking at our own data and engagement with the Partnership Boards for initial views.
- The Discovery Phase will end in April, and findings will be taken to the Executive Leadership Team for a decision on next steps.
- A full 2-year programme will follow.

Members raised a wide range of concerns:

- Difficulties accessing support; inconsistent eligibility criteria.
- Frequent social worker changes and lack of follow-up communication.
- Insufficient autism-specific training for support staff.
- Financial assessment challenges, unclear charging policies and difficulty contacting finance teams.
- Lack of clear communication.
- Lack of suitable day opportunities for autistic adults without learning disabilities.
- Paperwork burdens reducing meaningful support time.
- Long assessment waiting times and unclear expectations.
- A need for clearer communication, accountability and realistic commitments from services.

Julie/Leadership Team will return to the APB with updates.

8. Neurodevelopmental Programme

Catherine Pritchard (ICB) was unable to attend as she is leaving the NHS; slides were circulated in advance.

Concerns were raised around:

- Rationing access to assessments.
- Some GPs not accepting the shared cared plan.

9. Bringing this together

- All Age Autism Strategy delayed; update expected at July meeting.
- Autism Awareness Month flyer will be circulated after the meeting. **Action:** Diana.
- ToR agreed apart from the co-chair section. Updated ToR to be circulated. **Action:** Lydia.
- Information and Involvement Team will be arranging future Board meetings. Future meeting dates were shared. Chairing will transfer to the teams Service Manager, James Ironside from July.
- Lifelong Services Transformation Programme update provided; further updates to come from Julie/Leadership Team.
- Diana will request an update to the Neurodevelopmental Programme from the ICB. **Action:** Diana.

10. Any other business

- Members emphasised the importance of meetings happening at a regular time and day in the month.
- Members asked what happens if the strategy is rejected: this will depend on the reasons and will be discussed at a leader APB meeting.
- Sheryl Bunting updated the APB that she is leaving Carers Support West Sussex' thanked the Board. There is currently no direct replacement, but another representative of Carers Support West Sussex will attend.

Actions agreed:

Action	Who by	Timescale
Publish December minutes to WSCC website	Meeting administrator Gary Capelin	April 26
Inform Jo Baldwin of any other group/forums that would benefit from hearing about Connect to Work/Day Ops information and updates.	Gary Capelin	Before next APB
Circulate the Autism Awareness Month flyer once dates are confirmed	Diana Bernhardt	April 26
Circulate Engagement & Involvement presentation slides	Gary Capelin	After APB

Send invite for Customer and Carer Conference follow-up session on 2 April	Lydia Taylor	After APB
Lifelong Services Transformation Programme – return with further updates	Julie/leadership team	At future APB

Date of next meeting:

28 July 2026, 11am - 1pm (online, Microsoft Teams)

Microsoft Teams link will be circulated 2 weeks prior.