

Dear Chair, TDS and Senator's of this committee, we would both like to thank you from the outset for the opportunity for us both to speak to you today.

Ger, Caroline and I are from the Autism Support Hub, based in Dublin 15. In the first instance we are here today as parents of Autistic children and secondly as advocates trying to make a difference to help and support families. I think it is important to say that whilst today is a great privilege we as parents should not have to be here, but the sad reality is circumstances necessitate due to the blatant failures of the State to provide basic supports for our children. We as individuals have to constantly fight fight fight for the basic supports for our children to allow them to prosper and grow to reach their full potential. This should not require a battle.

Back in 2020, I decided to set-up the Autism Support Hub, and with the support of three other mothers (Ger Kenny) who's with me today being one of them set about on a journey that has been a privileged one, a journey into the private lives of many families we meet each week. The original purpose of the Hub was to help and support parents of recently diagnosed Autistic children, but it soon became apparent the remit of the Hub was far greater than this. At its essence when setting up the Hub, I didn't want parents of recently diagnosed children to experience the same sense of loss, worry and helplessness that I experienced when my son Gavin was diagnosed just over 10 years ago. I am sad to say that 10 years later families are still experiencing the same sense of loss upon receiving their child's diagnosis, and this is not right. Families need to be better supported from the GetGo.

We open our doors to meet parents in a private capacity and safe space where we share our own knowledge and experience. Through this engagement with parents, we offer them support and information they need to navigate their own personal journey. We stay with them on this journey until they feel empowered to go it on their own. Each week since the opening of the Hub we have met families in crisis who are battling the unfair system we find ourselves in when it comes to accessing services and support. These services are seen as a luxury, but they are the difference between our children thriving and barely surviving. This is the reality for many of us. We see so many families struggling around school places. Either they have none or the one they have is unsuccessful due to the lack of training of teachers, therefore no understanding of the child's needs within the school setting. As we know our children having the appropriate school setting is of the highest importance. We need principals, teachers and SNA's to have mandatory and continuous training for our children to have a positive school experience and not have parents worried sick for the day when their children are gone and often suffer the back lash when they children are home for e.g. masking (when emotions are masked until they get home)

Where parents express difficulty with their school we suggest Ger Kenny to contact the principal to offer free Tusla accredited autism training under ACE (Autism Clubs and Education) also founded and supported by Ger for teachers and sna's.

The Autism support Hub at its essence provides moral support to the parents who walk through our doors. Sometimes this is chat, a hug or a simple 'we understand', but we also offer epractical support. Week in week out we support families with the many burdensome forms that exist when trying to access support, be they educational or financial, from home tuition, DCA and Carers allowance to mention but a few. Parents come back on many occasions for the continued moral support, and unfortunately for the support in appealing the many DCA applications refusals. Reform of how these forms are assessed will go a long way in supporting families.

We also offer families the opportunity to attend professional talk through PLAN (Parent Led Autism Network) set up voluntarily by Ger Kenny. Ger has rolled out PLAN in other parts of Dublin where there is much needed support required for families. PLAN offers free talks by professionals on a wide variety of autism topics. These talks are booked out month on month and again have proved an incredible support for parents trying to cope.

In Dublin 15 we also have Little Seeds autism arch club, which offers a social outlet to over 70 autistic children. Only last week ger opened Little Seeds Autism Support Therapy services to these 70 families, which as we know, such therapies should be offered by the HSE and Disability Services but there not so Ger went about not only finding the therapist but setting up the service.

The reason for these therapy services existing within this group, is due to the hard work of local fundraising. We also rely heavily on the support of AsIAM, as some situations require more professional support and advocacy which is beyond our expertise and knowledge. We direct these families to the Community Support Team in AsIAM through AsIAM's Autism Information Line. We would like to thank you for listening to us today and we hope going forward you agree that what we are doing in Dublin 15 can be mirrored on a national level with the support of yourselves and government bodies.

Kind regards  
Ciara, Ger, Caroline and Sylvanna.