The Herald – Stuart Jacob, Director, Falkland House School, member of the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition

Agenda: So much more to do to help those with autism fulfil their potential

Today marks the seventh anniversary of World Autism Awareness Day as groups across the globe focus on increasing knowledge and acceptance of autism through fundraising and awareness raising activities.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a condition that, to varying degrees, affects social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, interests and repetitive behaviour. It includes Asperger syndrome and affects girls and boys of all races and in all geographic regions with a huge impact on their families, communities and societies.

Around one in a hundred people in Scotland has ASD and while the causes are unknown, it is thought that several complex genetic and environmental factors are involved. In some cases, an underlying condition may contribute to this.

A range of events will be held across Scotland today and during the week to raise awareness and understanding of ASD, from clothes swaps to art exhibitions, from sponsored walks to information open days. Falkland House School in Fife will host a seminar on the emotional health and wellbeing of those with autism later in the month and Autism Network Scotland will promote its Autism Toolbox to support those dealing with children and young people with autism.

Symptoms of autism are usually seen early in development. Most children with severe autism are diagnosed by age 3 but some children with milder forms of autism, such as Asperger syndrome, may not be diagnosed until later, when their problems with social interaction cause difficulties at school.

Children, young people and adults with ASD are often also affected by other mental health conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety or depression. About half of those with ASD also have varying levels of learning difficulties. However, with appropriate support many people can be helped to become independent.

There is no 'cure', but a wide range of support – including educational and behavioural – can help people with the condition. However, a range of specialist education and behavioural programmes (often referred to as interventions) can be effective in improving the skills of children with ASD.

Some types of intervention can involve hours of intensive work, and this is not always possible for many families because of the practical, emotional and financial commitments necessary. Treatment for ASD often involves a team of different specialists working together, such as a paediatrician, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist.
The prevalence of ASD is currently rising in many countries around the world and we have witnessed a dramatic increase in numbers of children, particularly in the early years. In Edinburgh, for example, the number of children requiring early years support for autism has tripled over six years to 91 children.

This rise can be explained in part by improved public recognition of ASD, improved clinical understanding and developments in diagnosis. If children are diagnosed in the early years then they will require additional support throughout their school years and this requires greater resourcing. Indeed, caring for and educating children and young people with this condition places challenges on health care, education and training programs generally, against a background of often constrained resourcing available.

Children with more severe symptoms and learning difficulties are likely to need more additional care and assistance to live independently as adults, although there is no reason why they and their families cannot enjoy a good quality of life.

Some people with ASD had features of the condition as a child, but enter adulthood without ever being diagnosed. However, getting a diagnosis as an adult can often help people with ASD and their families understand the condition and work out what kind of support they need.

While there is a lot of good work going on across the sectors in supporting those with autism there is still much that can be done to ensure that they can reach their full potential. We would recommend that individuals take full advantage of the events on offer both today and for the rest of the week to develop a greater awareness and understanding of autism.