

This past week has been autism awareness week culminating next week in world autism awareness day. Before becoming a member of Parliament I didn't really know a lot about autism. I know a lot more now through casework, visiting groups and schools, and also through working with my own team member Robbie who has Asperger's. But even now I would say that I still don't know it all and that is why I think autism awareness events are hugely important.

Around 700,000 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum. Together with their families, this means autism is a part of daily life for 2.8 million people. It is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them. It also affects people very differently, with some being high functioning and others having severe levels. There is little understanding of the condition and definitely a real issue regarding levels of stigma.

Interestingly when I have met organisations who are working with children and adults with autism in the past few months, and because of my new ministerial role, the problem of loneliness is always mentioned. While there is a natural concern about isolation within children who are diagnosed with autism there is a startling concern about the parents of those children too.

From all I read and know thus far getting a diagnosis is important because then the right level of support can be put in place for the family. We need to do more to support those with autism throughout their lives and these kind of awareness events should help focus all of our minds to create the right environment for people to learn, live and thrive in spite of their condition.