# Labour MP urges legislative overhaul as thousands of people with autism and learning disabilities remain hospitalised without adequate community support



People with learning disabilities or autism are currently subject to detention in mental health hospitals without necessarily having an accompanying mental health condition, a practice which has long drawn concern from disability advocates and politicians alike. According to the charity Mencap, the average length of stay for individuals detained under these circumstances is nearly five years, with more than 2,000 people living in such settings. Many argue that this situation largely stems from a lack of adequate social care and appropriate housing options in the community.

Labour MP Jen Craft, representing Thurrock, has raised alarm over the issue, emphasising that legislative change is urgently needed to prevent people from being detained for their conditions alone. She has tabled an amendment to the Mental Health Bill, which is scheduled for debate in the Commons, seeking a clear government roadmap that outlines how sufficient community services will be established to support these individuals outside hospital settings. Speaking to the PA news agency, Ms Craft described the ongoing detention of people with autism and learning disabilities as “almost a moral failing of our society.” She voiced particular concern about the lack of clarity on what constitutes “sufficient community services” and the risk that without a defined plan, many vulnerable people could remain in hospital indefinitely.

Highlighting the personal dimension of the issue, Ms Craft spoke of her own experience as the mother of a disabled daughter, underscoring the profound challenges faced by families and carers. She warned that in the crowded landscape of government priorities, the needs of this relatively small but highly vulnerable group might be overlooked or deprioritised. The community support envisioned includes a variety of options such as residential care, live-in carers, and support workers to help individuals participate in work, volunteering, and attend medical appointments, thereby promoting their health and social inclusion.

The call for urgent reform has been echoed by leading disability organisations. In a joint statement, Mencap, the National Autistic Society, and the Challenging Behaviour Foundation described the harrowing experiences of many detained individuals, citing reports of abuse, neglect, and prolonged solitary confinement. They urged MPs to back Ms Craft’s amendment as a critical step toward publishing a comprehensive plan to bolster community-based support and activate legislative changes promptly.

Data from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) adds further weight to these concerns. Its 2023-2024 report noted that over half of autistic individuals and those with learning disabilities in inpatient care have stays exceeding two years, with nearly 17% experiencing hospitalisation for more than ten years. Alarmingly, fewer than a quarter of these individuals have a planned discharge date, with many remaining institutionalised due to shortages in suitable housing and social care services. The CQC’s findings underscore a systemic issue in the transition from hospital to community care, signaling the need for urgent investment and strategic planning.

Concurrently, NHS England’s Learning Disability and Autism programme continues to address these challenges, acknowledging the ongoing inequalities faced by these populations. Its latest update from September 2025 outlines planned efforts to reduce reliance on inpatient care and improve service provision for autism and ADHD, emphasising that all sectors within the NHS must better accommodate the complex needs of this group. These initiatives align with the demands for comprehensive community support that advocates and politicians like Ms Craft are championing.

Historically, Mencap has highlighted the consequences of insufficient social care investment, pointing to over 2,200 individuals with learning disabilities and autism detained in inpatient units and the increasing use of restrictive interventions, including physical and chemical restraints. The charity has consistently called for proper funding and political commitment to build community-based support infrastructures that prevent unnecessary hospitalisation and improve quality of life.

The debate over the Mental Health Bill thus represents a pivotal moment. While Ms Craft praises parts of the legislation proposed by the House of Lords for their potential benefits, she insists on the necessity of a robust, transparent, and detailed plan for community care services. Without this, she fears the “legislative powers” aimed at reducing detention could remain dormant, allowing the current troubling status quo to persist.

The stories behind the statistics reveal a stark reality: individuals with learning disabilities and autism face prolonged stays in hospital environments that can cause lasting trauma, social isolation, and a breakdown of autonomy. The move toward community-based care not only aligns with modern principles of dignity and human rights but also promises to better meet the diverse needs of these individuals. It remains to be seen whether government action, spurred by parliamentary advocacy and pressure from charities, will deliver on these promises and effect meaningful change.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/national/25540367.government-needs-show-plan-mental-health-community-care-says-labour-mp/), [[4]](https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/failure-invest-social-care-leaving-2220-children-and-adults-learning-disability-andor), [[6]](https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/over-2000-people-learning-disability-andor-autism-still-locked-away-inpatient-unit)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/national/25540367.government-needs-show-plan-mental-health-community-care-says-labour-mp/)
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* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-report/state-care/2023-2024/areas-of-concern/ld)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/update-on-learning-disability-and-autism-programme/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[4]](https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/failure-invest-social-care-leaving-2220-children-and-adults-learning-disability-andor), [[5]](https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/2250-people-learning-disability-andor-autism-remain-locked-away-risk-abuse), [[6]](https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/over-2000-people-learning-disability-andor-autism-still-locked-away-inpatient-unit)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/national/25540367.government-needs-show-plan-mental-health-community-care-says-labour-mp/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/national/25540367.government-needs-show-plan-mental-health-community-care-says-labour-mp/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/update-on-learning-disability-and-autism-programme/> - This NHS England report, dated 22 September 2025, provides an overview of the Learning Disability and Autism programme, highlighting ongoing challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities and autism. It discusses the need for further progress in reducing the number of people in mental health hospitals and addresses health inequalities. The report outlines planned approaches for the coming years, emphasizing the necessity for all parts of the NHS to better consider the needs of these populations. It also mentions the development of a plan to improve autism and ADHD service provision and demand management.
3. <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-report/state-care/2023-2024/areas-of-concern/ld> - The Care Quality Commission's report highlights concerns regarding the care of individuals with learning disabilities and autism in mental health hospital settings. Data from June 2024 indicates that over half of autistic individuals and those with learning disabilities in inpatient care had stays exceeding two years, with nearly 17% having stays over ten years. The report also notes that less than a quarter had a planned discharge date, and many experienced delays due to a lack of suitable housing and social care support.
4. <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/failure-invest-social-care-leaving-2220-children-and-adults-learning-disability-andor> - Mencap's press release from 21 November 2019 criticizes the lack of investment in social care, leading to over 2,220 individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism being detained in inpatient units. The release highlights an average length of stay of 5.4 years and an increase in the use of restrictive interventions, with one in four incidents involving children. Mencap calls for all political parties to commit to proper investment in community support to prevent such detentions.
5. <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/2250-people-learning-disability-andor-autism-remain-locked-away-risk-abuse> - In this 17 October 2019 press release, Mencap reports that 2,250 individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism remain detained in inpatient units, with 235 being children. The release notes an average length of stay of 5.4 years and a significant increase in the use of restrictive interventions, including physical, mechanical, and chemical restraint. Mencap urges the government to invest in community support and services to prevent such detentions and improve care quality.
6. <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/over-2000-people-learning-disability-andor-autism-still-locked-away-inpatient-unit> - Mencap's press release from 19 March 2020 highlights that over 2,000 individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism remain detained in inpatient units, with 235 being children. The release expresses concern over the government's emergency coronavirus bill potentially leading to more admissions and calls for urgent investment in social care to prevent further detentions. It also notes an average length of stay of 5.5 years and an increase in the use of restrictive interventions.
7. <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/number-of-autistic-people-in-mental-health-ho-19> - Published on 29 May 2024, this article from the National Autistic Society provides the latest data on the number of autistic individuals in mental health hospitals. As of April 2024, 2,015 autistic people and those with learning disabilities are in inpatient mental health hospitals in England, with 68% being autistic. The article highlights the increase in the number of autistic individuals in inpatient facilities and the need for improved community support.