

# NHS vows to stop locking up autistic children

**Greg Hurst** Social Affairs Editor

The health service has said that it will stop locking up, isolating and physically restraining autistic children after an inquiry stated that it was damaging to their health.

NHS England has committed to make radical changes within 18 months, including a pledge not to place children with autism and learning difficulties in psychiatric wards unless they have a mental illness.

Matt Hancock, the health secretary, commissioned an inquiry led by Teresa Fenech, director of nursing at NHS England, after a series of scandals that

involved the abuse of vulnerable patients, enforced medication and the use of seclusion cells.

In one case a girl with autism, Bethany, then aged 17, was held in isolation for 21 months at a private psychiatric hospital in Northampton.

Ms Fenech's report concluded: "No children should be admitted to mental health hospital in absence of mental health need and therefore with a clear therapeutic intent and expected outcomes."

Bethany's father, who can be identified only by his first name, Jeremy, welcomed aspects of the report but said that part of the problem was a failure to

follow existing laws. He said: "I don't want my daughter's nightmare to result in false recommendations. I want the changes to happen."

Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, yesterday announced a task force of families, clinicians, charities and public officials to look at improvements to inpatient care and community alternatives.

Mr Stevens said: "This task force will place a spotlight on services and care for some of the most vulnerable young people in our society, bringing together families, leading clinicians, charities and other public bodies to help make these services as effective, safe and

supportive as possible for thousands of families."

There are an estimated 2,270 people with autism or a learning disability who were hospital inpatients, almost half on secure wards. Of those, 255 are children and several hundred are aged 18-24. The figure has been rising.

Anne Longfield, the children's commissioner for England, who has highlighted how many children with autism or learning disabilities become stuck in hospitals when they do not need to be there, will chair an independent board to monitor progress. She said that she would use her role to amplify the voice of these children and their families, to

scrutinise progress and hold the system to account.

A previous programme to improve care for people with autism and learning disabilities, Transforming Care, announced in 2012 after revelations of the abuse of vulnerable patients at Winterbourne View hospital in Humber, South Gloucestershire, failed to achieve a switch to community care.

Jane Harris, director of external affairs at the National Autistic Society, said: "We continue to hear disturbing stories of autistic children being detained for long periods, miles from their family and overmedicated, inappropriately restrained and kept in isolation."