

Understanding Autism

MP sessions



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Thank you for attending the first ever Understanding Autism session specially designed for MPs. You are helping to create a world that works for autistic people and their families.

This session will provide you with an overview about autism and how best to include autistic people within your work in your constituency.

If you would like more information about further training that we can offer or any aspect of this session, please get in touch by emailing policy@nas.org.uk.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. There are approximately 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK and three million family members and carers.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways.

Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum can learn and develop.

We ran some research with autistic people, and they told us that the public need to know that autistic people may:

- have anxiety in social interactions
- have anxiety in situations of unexpected change
- need more time to process information
- have sensory differences
- have 'meltdowns' or 'shutdowns'.

Without the right support or understanding, autistic people can miss out on an education. They can struggle to find work, with only one in six autistic people in full-time employment. Autistic children are three times more likely to be excluded from school than children without special needs, while 79% of autistic people feel socially isolated. All this means that over a third of autistic people have serious mental health problems.



Who is the National Autistic Society?

The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws. We have come a long way but it is not good enough.

Our branches

We have 116 volunteer-led branches across the UK. 75% of the UK population live within 20 miles of a National Autistic Society branch. It is likely that there is a National Autistic Society branch that covers your constituency.

Branch activities depend on volunteer capacity and typically fall into four categories - providing information, supporting families, campaigning and fundraising. Some branches run drop-in sessions, some organise children's activity clubs and others run adult support or social groups.

Our campaigns: The Autism Act's 10th anniversary

The *Autism Act 2009* was a landmark in the long campaign to improve the lives of autistic adults in England. As a result of the Act, a national adult autism strategy sets out a vision for all autistic adults to lead fulfilling lives; and almost every area now has a route to autism diagnosis for adults and a lead autism commissioner. But we know that implementation of the Act remains patchy and many local areas are not meeting their obligations under the Act in full.

Meanwhile, autistic people still struggle with poor public understanding, getting a diagnosis and support, and finding and keeping work.

This year marks the Act's 10th anniversary. It is also a milestone year for reviewing the strategy and the Act's implementation. This provides an important opportunity to look at what has changed 10 years on and to restate the importance of the Act, but also to campaign for further changes.



Working with the APPGA, we are using this opportunity to review the current state of care and support for autistic children and adults, bringing together autistic people, families, professionals, commissioners and parliamentarians.

How can you be a more autism-friendly MP?

Join the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA) was set up in February 2000. In the years since, it has grown to have almost 250 members and is one of the most active groups in Parliament. Its role is to campaign in Parliament for greater awareness of autism, and to lobby the Government for improved services for autistic people and their parents and carers. Its secretariat is provided by the National Autistic Society.

You can find out more about the APPGA by emailing appga@nas.org.uk or by visiting www.autism.org.uk.

There is also a sign-up sheet at today's event. Please ask a member of staff if you would like to join.



Talking to autistic people

You may already have extensive experience of speaking to autistic people. We have included the advice below in case you find it helpful. The characteristics of autism include difficulty with social communication and social interaction and autistic people often have difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal language.

- 1 Many have a very literal understanding of language. Some autistic people may not speak, or have fairly limited speech. Others will have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the social rules of conversation, such as when to stop speaking or when it is okay to interrupt. Avoiding metaphors, non-literal language and open-ended questions is best.



- 2 Autistic people often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings. They may also have trouble expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially. Interpreting body language may also prove very difficult. They may not understand the unwritten social rules so they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation.



- 3 Autistic people can also experience difficulty with social imagination. This is what allows us to understand and predict other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. This means that autistic people find it hard to understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions and cope in new or unfamiliar situations.



- 4 Say autistic people, not 'people with autism'. Our research found most autistic people prefer to be addressed in this way. However, check how a person self-identifies, as they may prefer to use another term.



- 5 Manage expectations. Because autistic people can take language very literally, if you commit to something eg contacting them next Tuesday, be sure to follow through. When replying to questions, it is important to be clear that while the policies you discuss might help autistic people, they will not necessarily change things for that individual.



Host an autism-friendly surgery

There are a few very small things that you can do to help autistic people access your constituency surgery. You can do this in all of your surgeries, or have specific 'autism-friendly' surgeries. Several MPs have tried this and both they and their constituents found them really useful.

Here are a few ideas for making your surgery autism-friendly:

- 1 Provide information about your venue. Having an autism-friendly guide to the venue you hold your surgeries in helps autistic people to familiarise themselves with an unknown place. Include pictures of the building, entrances and how to get there, as well as pictures of any staff who may be present on the day.



- 2 Give time to process information. Autistic people can need more time to process information. While silences in a conversation can seem awkward, they can be essential to help autistic people to participate and communicate effectively. Offering a longer appointment so your constituents have time to process, while still having a full discussion, is an easy adjustment to make.



- 3 Think about the environment. Autistic people may have sensory difficulties, and may be over- or under-sensitive to smells, sounds, light and touch. Where it is safe to do so, reducing the lights and background noise can prevent sensory overload and reduce anxiety during your surgery.



- 4 Try to stick to plans you make. Autistic people can find change, especially unexpected or last-minute change, difficult to cope with and it can cause huge amounts of anxiety. Wherever possible, stick to the plans and times you've made for your surgery meeting. And if things do have to change, give people information about when or where it's changing to, and allow people some time to process the information about the change.



The National Autistic Society is happy to help you to create an autism-friendly surgery in your constituency by providing advice and information. Please contact policy@nas.org.uk.

National Autistic Society

Transforming lives and changing attitudes since 1962

- Our helpline, website and 116 local volunteer-led branches provide information, support and practical advice to hundreds of autistic people and their families every day
- We train over 11,000 teachers, health workers and other professionals every year to help ensure schools, health services and workplaces meet the needs of autistic people.
- Our *Too Much Information* campaign has reached 65 million people, helping to increase understanding of the difficulties autistic people face every day.
- In 2009, we led a campaign to persuade the Government to introduce the first ever Autism Act in England that guarantees the rights of autistic adults.
- Over 11,000 businesses take part in Autism Hour every year.
- To date, 52 organisations have been awarded our Autism Friendly Award, including Buckingham Palace, Edinburgh Airport and the BBC Media Centre in Salford.

With your help, we can do even more.
Find out how you can make a world that works for
autistic people by emailing appga@nas.org.uk.



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