



National
Autistic
Society

A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a pink and white floral sari, sits next to a young man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt. They are sitting at a restaurant table with plates of food and glasses. The woman is looking directly at the camera, while the man is looking slightly to the side. The background shows a restaurant interior with a chandelier and other tables.

**How can MPs show up
for autistic people?**

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New insights into the lives of autistic people from the National Autistic Society reveal how discrimination and negative experiences are a regular part of daily life and that autistic people avoid going out and are isolated as a result.

One in four autistic people say that when they tell a member of the public they are autistic, they usually get a negative reaction¹.

Autistic people also report negative reactions more than twice as often as positive reactions².

Key statistics

Missing out

55% of autistic people say they have avoided going out because they are worried about how people they meet will treat them.

Almost **eight in ten** carers say the autistic person they care for has been unable to attend leisure activities due to other people's attitudes or perceptions of autism. Three quarters say the autistic person they care for has experienced loneliness.

Nine in ten autistic people have experienced poor mental health due to other people's attitudes or perceptions of autism. **84%** have experienced social isolation.



Over a third of autistic people mask when they go out, because they are worried about how people they meet will treat them.³

Did you know?

Masking is a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic in order to blend in and be more accepted in society. **Masking can be exhausting and have a devastating impact on mental health.**



Public assumptions




One in four autistic people say that when they tell a member of the public they are autistic, they usually get a negative reaction. Autistic people report negative reactions more than twice as often as positive reactions.

Almost a third of autistic people avoid telling members of the public they are autistic.

Almost all autistic people and those supporting autistic people reported negative assumptions being made frequently about them by members of the public. The most common assumptions were that the autistic person was weird, strange, rude or anti-social.⁴

Almost nine in ten autistic people say most people they meet have heard of autism, and 56% of UK adults say they are confident in their ability to support autistic people.⁵

However,  **only 6%** of autistic people think that most people they meet have a good understanding of autism.⁶

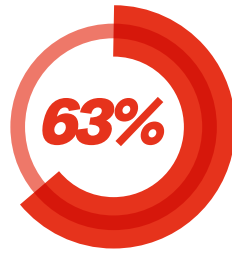
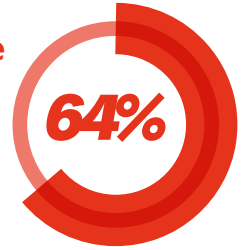


The discrimination autistic people face is no secret.



Nearly half of UK adults think that autistic people receive negative reactions from others when they tell them about their autism diagnosis.

Nearly two thirds of UK adults agree that autistic people face discrimination because they are autistic.



63% of UK adults think that autistic people face lost friendships/difficulty making friends, while **57%** who think they face fewer job opportunities.

When asked about the impacts on autistic people due to public attitudes about autism, **72%** of UK adults mentioned social isolation, followed by **64%** who mentioned loneliness and loss of friendships/difficulty making friends⁷.



Why do politicians need to do more to show up for autistic people?

Politicians need to show up because autistic people not only face barriers and discrimination as part of daily life but also because many feel unable to engage with politicians and campaigning.

Survey results⁸ reveal:

50% of autistic campaigners said meeting with an MP, councillor or other politician is difficult or not possible for them.

Only 30% said they would be comfortable and confident meeting an MP, councillor or other politician.

42% of autistic people say there are fewer opportunities for them to get involved in politics and campaigning because they are autistic.

Yet autistic people face some of the largest barriers at work, school and in healthcare and need politicians to lead on understanding the issues they face and how society can change to work for all autistic people.

Currently, autistic people experience some of the largest health inequalities, dying six years earlier than the general population. Autistic people who also have a learning disability die up to 15 years earlier.⁹

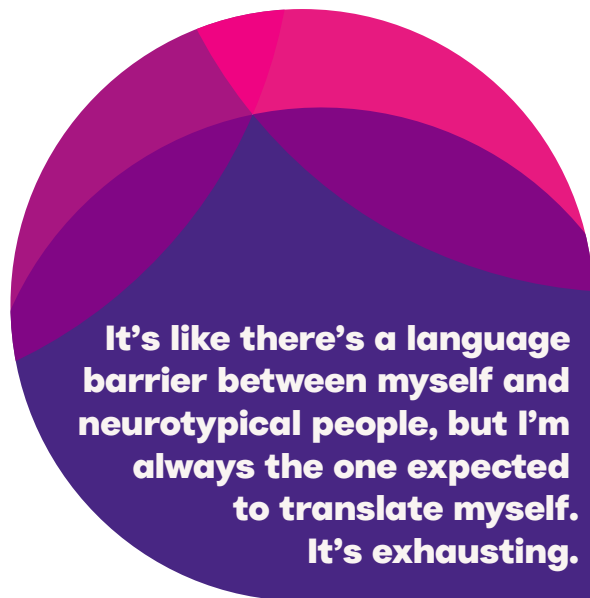
Seven in ten parents of autistic children say their child's school place doesn't meet their needs.¹⁰

Only three in ten autistic adults are in work, compared to 53% of disabled people - the lowest of any disability group.¹¹

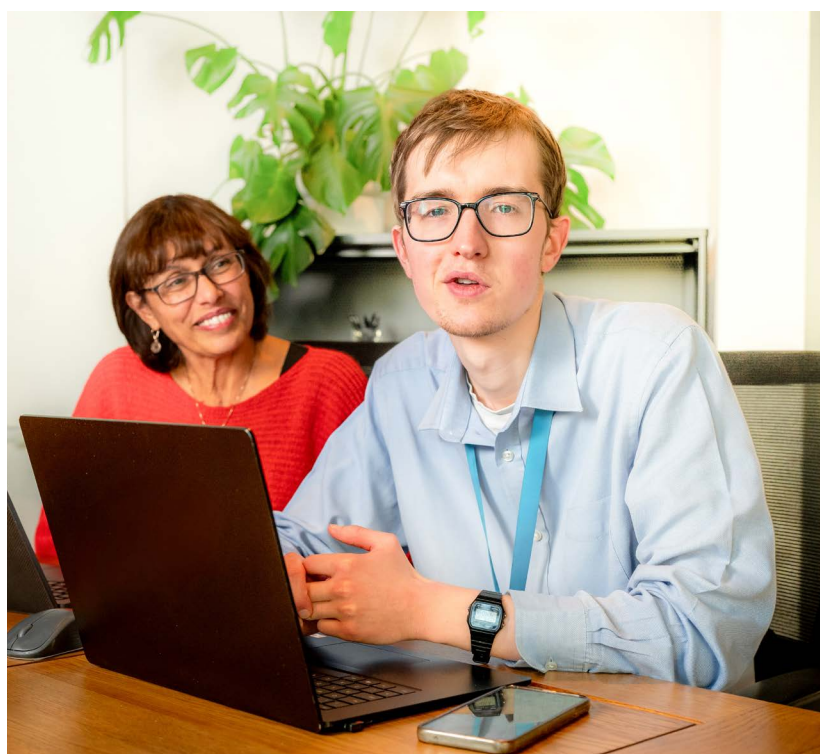
As of December 2024, a total of 212,964 people were waiting for an autism assessment in England, a 23% increase in one year.¹²

We want to help MPs by providing this report and more in-depth Understanding Autism sessions so politicians can understand more about what life is like for autistic people and the differing experiences people have.

You can book onto one of our Understanding Autism sessions by emailing policy@nas.org.uk. Find out more on page 12.



Lydia, National Autistic Society Young Ambassador



What is autism?

Autism influences how people experience and interact with the world. It is a lifelong neurodivergence and disability. Autistic people are different from each other, but for a diagnosis they must share differences from non-autistic people in how they think, feel and communicate.

Autism is understood as a spectrum. In the past, people thought the spectrum was a straight line between 'more' and 'less' autistic. This isn't right. Today we understand the spectrum to mean each autistic person has a unique combination of characteristics. Autistic people can be very different to each other, with different sets of strengths and challenges. The presence or visibility of characteristics can vary a lot between autistic people. This can also change over time, in different situations or if the person is masking.

It is not a spectrum across the population as a whole and does not mean everyone is 'a little bit autistic'. This idea is offensive and dismissive of the challenges faced by autistic people.

What is autism? Core characteristics

Communication differences

Autistic people may have different communication styles, skills and preferences to non-autistic people. They may use and understand words, tone of voice and body language, such as gestures and facial expressions, differently. Some autistic people have restricted or no speech and may communicate in other ways, for example through sign language or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), such as picture cards or electronic tablets. Autistic people may try to 'behave neurotypically'. This is called masking, which can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

Did you know?

Masking can include:

- mirroring others' facial expressions
- forcing eye contact
- changing speech or tone of voice
- suppressing stimming behaviours
- avoiding talking about special interests



Why MPs need a strong understanding of autism

Autism needs to be a policy priority for Parliament and the Government. Autistic people face some of the greatest inequalities in society across health and social care, education, employment and mental health. Fundamentally, autistic people's experiences represent a key test of public policy: if you can make the system work for autistic people, it is likely to work better for everybody.

Autistic people form a significant part of the national population. More than one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. This highlights the potential to make system-level changes with a large impact.

MPs need a good understanding of autism so they can successfully support their autistic constituents. Poor understanding impedes the abilities of MPs, their caseworkers and others from advocating for and providing appropriate support. An accurate understanding of autism enables you to be a better MP who shows up for your autistic constituents.

What is autism? Core characteristics

Rigidity and routine

Autistic people experience differences in behaviours and interests which affect their everyday lives. Experts often refer to these as Restrictive and Repetitive Behaviours and Interests (RRBIs). While they impact daily life, many autistic people view these differences as positive. They include:

Focused and dedicated interests - e.g. a strong passion for a hobby or topic (TV show, historical period, etc.)

Repeated movements and behaviours (often called "stimming"), which can be a form of self-regulation - e.g. hand-flapping, hair twirling, repeating phrases, etc.

Preference for order, predictability, or routine - e.g. needing details of plans in advance, consistent application of rules, having the same daily routine, strong preference for a specific recipe for favourite meal. Many autistic people find transitions (e.g. moving house) or disruption to routines difficult, which can negatively impact their wellbeing.



Autistic people and their families often face negative perceptions that can make it harder to get helpful adjustments at work and school or find health professionals who understand their needs.

Lack of understanding also makes it harder to convince decision-makers at all levels that urgent change and basic support are needed for autistic people to live their lives.

Dismissive and speculative narratives about autistic and other neurodivergent people, e.g. middle-class parents seeking easy support for their 'troublesome' or 'misbehaving' children, or that neurodivergence is a trend influenced by social media, can make it harder for people and families to access vital support.

These narratives also couldn't be further from the reality of the long, bureaucratic and stressful processes autistic people and their families face to get a diagnosis and the long battles to get Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) support for autistic children and young people.

Did you know?

More than **one in four parents** (26%) **wait over three years** to receive support for their child.¹³

What is autism? Core characteristics



Sensory differences

Autistic people can be notably more or less sensitive than non-autistic people across the five main senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch), as well as balance (vestibular), spatial awareness (proprioception), and awareness of internal states such as hunger (interoception). This does not have to be consistent across all senses - an autistic person, for example, may be more sensitive to sound, while being less sensitive to interoception.

When experiencing sensory overstimulation, autistic people can become distressed. Continued overstimulation can have negative impacts on an autistic person's short- and long-term wellbeing.

What MPs can do to **show up for autistic people**



You can run autism-friendly surgeries by:

- providing written copies of information;
- allowing for extra processing time when speaking with autistic people;
- being understanding about differences in eye contact, intonation, etc.;
- giving plenty of notice when plans change (e.g. cancellations/venue changes);
- maintaining a low input environment in your office by using softer lights, turning off radios or music and using a booking system to avoid busy queues;
- having a quiet space available.

You can better support your autistic constituents with casework by:

- making sure key stakeholders such as employers, councils and schools have a good understanding of autistic people and their needs;
- providing autistic people with clear and direct information;
- making sure they are notified of unexpected changes;
- increasing your understanding of relevant legislation that guarantees autistic people's rights, such as the *Autism Act 2009* and the *Care Act 2014*.

You can show up for autistic people in Parliament by:

- asking questions during PMQs/departmental question times or submitting written questions – the National Autistic Society is always happy to help provide questions;
- joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism;
- contributing to debates about autism and related topics (e.g. the Mental Health Bill, SEND, diagnosis wait times);
- challenging stigmatising and inflammatory comments and attitudes when you encounter them.

Meltdowns, shutdowns and burnout

When autistic people experience acute stress from overstimulation, exhaustion from masking, and/or disruption to their RRBIs, they can experience distressed behaviours, often categorised as meltdown, shutdown, or burnout. These are involuntary responses to being completely overwhelmed.

What is autism? Core characteristics

Understanding Autism sessions

To improve your understanding of autism and learn how you can show up for your autistic constituents, we strongly encourage you to attend one of our Understanding Autism sessions delivered by autistic staff members. Any MP who attends the session will be provided with a certificate as proof of attendance alongside a social media toolkit.

We have delivered a number of these sessions to MPs, Ministers, Lords and officials who have found them very useful:

A former Minister for Care and Mental Health said:

“It was fantastic to learn more about how government can lead the way to better support autistic people, and the steps I can personally take to do so. We can all make reasonable adjustments, including in the workplace.”

One MP said:

“I was pleased to attend the Understanding Autism session and grateful to the National Autistic Society for organising it. It is crucial for parliamentarians and their staff to be sensitive and aware of the challenges autistic people can face. I am sure this session will help me to offer improved support to my autistic constituents.”

Book your place on the next session by contacting policy@nas.org.uk. We will hold several sessions throughout the year, but if you can't attend on those dates, you can also contact us for a personal session for you and your staff.

¹National Autistic Society (2024). Evidence and Research Team, Autism Awareness Survey, 3rd – 16th June 2024, 4231 autistic respondents and 4007 people who support autistic individuals.

²National Autistic Society (2024). Evidence and Research Team, Autism Awareness Survey, 3rd – 16th June 2024, 4231 autistic respondents and 4007 people who support autistic individuals.

³National Autistic Society (2024). Evidence and Research Team, Autism Awareness Survey, 3rd – 16th June 2024, 4231 autistic respondents and 4007 people who support autistic individuals.

⁴National Autistic Society (2024). Evidence and Research Team, Autism Awareness Survey, 3rd – 16th June 2024, 4231 autistic respondents and 4007 people who support autistic individuals.

⁵A survey carried out by YouGov. Total sample size was 2128 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 12th - 13th February 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

⁶National Autistic Society (2024). Evidence and Research Team, Autism Awareness Survey, 3rd – 16th June 2024, 4231 autistic respondents and 4007 people who support autistic individuals.

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⁸The National Autistic Society (2024). Campaigns Survey Online, self-selecting questionnaire of 835 autistic campaigners.

⁹O’Nions, E. et al (2024). Estimating life expectancy and years of life lost for autistic people in the UK: a matched cohort study. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, Volume 36, 100776. [Online] available at: doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2023.100776.

¹⁰The National Autistic Society (2023). Education Report 2023. [Online] available at: autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/education-report-2023.

¹¹Department of Work and Pensions (2024). The employment of disabled people 2024. [Online] available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024.

¹²NHS England (2025). Autism Statistics, January 2024 to December 2024. [Online] available at: digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/autism-statistics/january-2024-to-december-2024.

¹³The National Autistic Society (2023). Education Report 2023. [Online] available at: autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/education-report-2023.