National Autistic Society Cymru



Understanding Autism

A guide for Members of the Senedd and Councillors

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Understanding Autism

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.

More than one in 100 people are autistic, and there are at least 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Of whom, there are at least 31,000 autistic adults and children living in Wales.

People of all ages, genders and ethnicities can be autistic. However, people from marginalised groups can face more barriers to getting a diagnosis due to a lack of awareness about the true diversity of autistic people.

Autism is understood as a spectrum. Our understanding of autism is evolving all the time, and 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 important not to make assumptions about an individual autistic person's skills, abilities or support needs.

Autism is not a learning disability or a mental health condition, but around a third of autistic people also have a learning disability. Autistic people are also more likely to experience mental health problems.

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Most autistic people see being autistic as central to who they are, and they may need support to succeed in a world designed for the needs of non-autistic people. It is important to remember that it's the barriers autistic people face in society that are an issue, not being autistic.

Without the right support or understanding, autistic people can miss out on an education. Exclusion or part-time timetabling have become symptomatic of a lack of support for autistic children and young people in our schools, such that children with additional learning needs (ALN) in Wales are between four to five times more likely to be excluded than those without.[1]

Autistic people can also struggle to find and stay in work. Only 30% of autistic people are in any form of employment.[2] Meanwhile, others feel under-employed or stuck in low-paid positions.

Getting access to the right healthcare support can also be a fraught process for autistic people. In fact, 80% of autistic adults in the UK report having difficulty visiting a GP, and 56% report not being understood at their appointment.[3]



Research has also suggested that autistic people are more likely to experience the most common reasons for feeling suicidal (mental health issues, trauma or stressful experiences, loneliness/ social isolation).[4] Suicide has been recorded as the second leading cause of early death for autistic people.[5]

We ran some research with autistic people, and they told us that the public needs 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'.[6]



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About the National Autistic Society Cymru

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for autistic people. We are 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 autistic adults and children in Wales, as well as their family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to the National Autistic Society 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 challenges many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and the Government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws. We have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go.

Our national branches

We have a network of branches across Wales led by families and autistic people themselves, providing vital support in their communities.

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. Many of our branches deliver 'Understanding Autism' talks to local businesses, job centres, libraries, schools and charities.



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"Having volunteers who can understand and empathise with them makes a huge difference. Being autistic, I can see how those conversations offering support and advice are helping the autistic individual and their families. Very often, I see the same members come back to the same event every week."

Ewan, Swansea branch volunteer

Our services

We provide a range of programmes and services of support for autistic children, young people, adults and their families living in Wales. All are delivered by our highly trained team of practitioners and are often supported by volunteers.

We also provide free access to information, advice and guidance, including:



a digital hub of evidence-based information, advice and guidance on our website



the UK's most comprehensive Autism Services Directory, including residential services, supported living and respite care, employment support, diagnosticians, schools and nurseries, social groups and leisure activities, solicitors and advocacy organisations



our Online Community for autistic people, their families and professionals to ask questions, support one another and discuss the issues and experiences that are important to them



our wide range of Welsh branch activities through signposting, peer support for families, raising awareness in local communities and local fundraising. Some branches run regular drop-in sessions, children's activities or social groups, while others focus on building community connections and sharing lived experience.

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Our campaigns

Since the creation of the then National Assembly for Wales in 1999, we have campaigned for improved services for autistic people. These campaigns have led to landmark changes to ensure improvements across public policy, including the Welsh Government creating the *Code of Practice on the Delivery of Autism Services* in 2021. Yet, we know there is still more to be done across policy areas such as health and social care, education and employment.

In January 2026, we launched our campaign for an autism and learning disability act for Wales. We are committed to tackling the inequalities faced by autistic people, including preventing the inappropriate sectioning and hospitalisation of autistic people and people with learning disabilities, highlighted by the *Stolen Lives* campaign. The National Autistic Society Cymru was part of the *Stolen Lives* Task and Finish Group, which advised on recommendations to strengthen legislation and protect the basic human rights of autistic people and people with a learning disability.

Our charity was also involved in creating the *Manifesto for Babies, Children and Young People with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)* for the Senedd Election in 2026, as part of the Third Sector Additional Learning Needs Alliance. As we continue to lobby for these policies in the new Senedd term, we encourage all members and councillors to think about the ways they can better represent their autistic constituents.



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How can you be a more autism-friendly MS or Councillor?

Join the Cross-Party Autism Group

The Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Autism was set up in 2002. Its role is to campaign in the Senedd for greater awareness of autism and lobby the Welsh Government for improved services for autistic people, their parents and carers. Its secretariat is provided by the National Autistic Society Cymru.

Find out more

You can find out more about the Autism CPG by emailing **james.radcliffe@nas.org.uk**.



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Talk to autistic people

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

1 Autistic people can have a literal understanding of language. Some autistic people may use few or no words. Others will have strong 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 broad, open-ended questions is best.

2 Autistic people can find it challenging to recognise or understand other people's emotions and feelings. They may also have trouble expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to feel included socially. Interpreting body language may also be more challenging. They may not understand the unwritten social rules – for example, they may stand too close to another person or start an inappropriate subject of conversation. By understanding these differences, you can make people feel more welcome and comfortable without judgment.

3 It is common for autistic people to have a preference for order, predictability and routine, which may make situations outside their daily routine harder or more draining. They may be less confident and need strategies and support to cope in new or unfamiliar situations. Think about how you can help autistic people prepare ahead of a meeting or change the environment where a meeting takes place.

4 We recommend using the term 'autistic people', rather than 'people with autism'. Research based on autistic people's preferences found that most prefer to be addressed in this way. However, check how a person self-identifies, as they may prefer to use another term.

5 Given that autistic people can take language very literally, if you commit to something, for example, contacting someone next Monday, be sure to follow through or send an update with a reason for the delay on that day. It is important to manage expectations clearly. 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.

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Tackle misinformation, misconceptions and harmful narratives

Harmful narratives about autism are often used to deny autistic people the support they need to participate fully in society and unfairly single out autistic people for wider societal issues, such as strained healthcare services and poor economic growth. Common narratives include:

- **unfounded causes of autism –** evidence has disproved many false claims about the causes of autism, and evidence suggests autism is genetic.
- **misinformation about the increase in diagnosis rates –** many researchers attribute the increase to rapidly growing public awareness and more women and people without co-occurring learning disabilities being diagnosed.
- **biased questions of autistic people who claim benefits –** data shows that of the £28.5 billion total that was awarded in Personal Independence Payments (PIP) in 2025-26, just 1.4% of payments were overpaid due to fraud[7] and neurological disabilities make up only 13% of all PIP claims.[8]
- **harmful narratives about seeking 'cures' for autism –** we believe that autism does not need a 'cure' and should be seen as a difference, not a disadvantage. Societal focus on harmful 'cures' leads to fake cures and potentially harmful interventions. Focusing on improving support for autistic people and valuing their autonomy and diversity leads to better outcomes and happier lives.
- **framing issues in education around children's disruptive behaviour rather than the lack of support that leads to such behaviour –** autistic children deserve an education like anyone else that meets their needs and builds their skills and confidence. Just 26% of autistic pupils feel happy at school.[9] There is widespread agreement that the current ALN support in mainstream schools is under strain and financially unsustainable. Framing these systemic issues around the resulting behaviours of children, who are being left behind in education, only damages children's wellbeing and further impacts their attainment outcomes.

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Misinformation about autism is increasing, and other harmful narratives may emerge during your term. The steps below can help you identify these in order to limit their reach and harmful impact.



1 **Consider the language -** pay attention to the language used in news articles, social media, research and other sources of information. Ask yourself whether the piece is designed to generate engagement without regard for accuracy or the impact of its narratives. Be cautious of emotionally-charged news stories and prioritise evidence-based reporting.



2 **Examine source credibility -** when sharing information, it's best to check whether the author has expertise or credentials in the subject, and whether the publisher is a reputable academic journal, university press or established news outlet. It is also important to listen to autistic people's experiences and ask yourself whether the views are in line with what autistic people typically say about that subject before sharing articles and research.



3 **Check facts -** take proactive steps to verify the accuracy of a news story before sharing it, especially on social media platforms, which are often vulnerable to manipulation. If you are ever unsure about the views in an article, you can check what organisations like the National Autistic Society Cymru say about that topic or contact our Policy and Campaigns team directly at **campaign@nas.org.uk**.



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4 **Counter narratives –** use what autistic people, organisations and other reputable sources have told you about autism to challenge misinformation directly, whether online or in-person. Here are some examples you can use:

a. Bad science and misinformation have created myths about the causes of autism. Autism is not caused by vaccines or paracetamol. Much research has been devoted to these issues over the years, and the results have shown there is no link.[10,11] In fact, evidence suggests that autism is genetic. Scientists have been attempting to identify which genes might be implicated in autism for some years. Autism is likely to have multiple genes responsible rather than a single gene. However, it is not caused by emotional deprivation or the way a person has been brought up.

b. There is a growing waiting time crisis and a lack of dedicated funding for quality autism assessment and diagnosis services. There is no evidence to suggest 'overdiagnosis' of autism is happening. Evidence suggests there is a significant underdiagnosis of autism, particularly among women and older people.[12] Research consistently shows more people are seeking an autism assessment and being diagnosed because of increased awareness and understanding of autism.



5 **Report misinformation –** if you see misinformation and false narratives about autism being shared online, you can report this to the social media company to get it removed. If in-person, there may be other appropriate methods of reporting, such as formal complaints.

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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 MSs have tried this, and both they and their constituents found them very 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, how to get there and 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-sensitive 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. If things do have to change, give people clear information about when or where it's changing to, and allow people some time to process the information about the change.

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The National Autistic Society Cymru is happy to help you create an autism-friendly surgery in your constituency by providing advice and information.

Please contact james.radcliffe@nas.org.uk



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Endnotes

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National Autistic Society Cymru

Thank you for reading this guide and taking the time to learn more about autism.

Together, we can create a society that works for autistic people.

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