



Department
of Health &
Social Care

The new all-age autism strategy

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We are one of the only countries in the world to have autism legislation

- The Autism Act 2009 is currently the only condition-specific legislation of its type in England.
- It places a duty on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to publish a strategy (and associated statutory guidance) for meeting the needs of autistic adults in England.
- The statutory guidance 'Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities and NHS organisations to Support Implementation of the Adult Autism Strategy' published in 2015 sets out duties on local authorities and NHS organisations to support autistic adults in local areas.
- Since the publication of the Autism Act, **we have published three autism strategies, the latest of which was published in July of this year.**



Autism Act 2009



Our new autism strategy is the first to support autistic people of all ages

- In 2019, we committed to refreshing the previous autism strategy *Think Autism*.
- We also promised to extend the scope of the strategy to children and young people, as well as adults for the first time.
- **To make sure we understood what the challenges and issues were for autistic people and their families, we:**
 1. Launched a national call for evidence for autistic people, their families and carers.
 2. Fed in findings from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism, which held an inquiry into the impact of the Autism Act.



What we found through our national Call for Evidence

There have been important improvements since the introduction of the Autism Act



Awareness of autism has improved substantially over the last decade. 99.5% of people have now heard of autism.



All areas now report having adult diagnosis pathways, up from less than half before 2009



Autism is a priority in the NHS Long Term Plan



There is greater use of reasonable adjustments in public services

But autistic people still face challenges throughout their lives



Many autistic people are facing health and care inequalities, and on average are dying 16 years earlier than the general population.



Too many autistic people are still being admitted into inpatient mental health hospitals.



ONS figures suggest only 22% of autistic people are in employment.



Too many autistic children are still having poor experiences of school, and finding the transition to adulthood difficult.



We also wanted to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on autistic people and their families when developing the new autism strategy

- That is why we commissioned the London School of Economics to undertake rapid research during summer 2020. This research influenced the actions we are prioritising in the first year of the strategy.

The research found that:

- COVID-19 has had a mixed impact on autistic people, and reinforced many of the challenges people were already facing.
- Many found lockdown very isolating and difficult to cope with, while others benefited from it as they did not have to interact with others socially and could avoid anxiety inducing situations.



Overall, existing issues like poor mental health, anxiety and loneliness became worse.



Many autistic people found social distancing restrictions difficult, as well as the unanticipated changes.



Some autistic people found being in lockdown, not having to travel to work or school a relief.



What our new autism strategy will do over the next five years

- Based on the findings from our national Call for Evidence, the APPGA inquiry and the rapid research, we decided to focus on 6 areas in which we need to make progress by 2026.
- Our new strategy sets out our vision for what we want autistic people's lives to look like in the next five years, and the actions we are taking towards this in our first implementation plan in 2021 – 2022.
- **The first year (2021 – 2022) implementation plan is backed by over £74 million and will be focused on addressing the impact of the pandemic.** We will publish future implementation plans to drive further progress for subsequent years of the strategy.

There are 6 areas we are focusing on in the strategy

Improving public understanding, to improve the public's understanding of what it means to be autistic.

Improving access to education, to improve support autistic children and young people are struggling at school.

Closing the employment gap, so people find it easier to get into and stay in work.

Reducing health and care inequalities, to ensure people get the support they need to live well in their communities.

Building the right support in the community, to prevent admissions into inpatient mental health settings.

Improving support within the criminal justice system, so people are treated fairly regardless of why they come into contact with the system.

Actions we are taking in the first year of our strategy as we move out of the pandemic (2021 – 2022)

Over the next 5 years, we want to create a society that truly understands and includes autistic people in all aspects of life; one in which autistic people of all ages have equal opportunities to play a full part in their communities and to have better access to the services they need throughout their lives.

In the first year we will work towards this by taking the following actions:

The main inequalities autistic people face	How these inequalities manifested during COVID-19	Key actions we are taking in the first year to address this
The public's understanding of autism is too low.	Lots of autistic people reported feeling judged or unwelcome in public spaces because they found restrictions difficult to understand.	We are investing £180,000 to develop a public understanding initiative, which is aimed at improving inclusion of autistic people in society.
Many autistic children and young people are struggling at school.	Some autistic children and young people reported benefits of being at home during the pandemic, but also expressed concerns about going back to school because of anxiety and being misunderstood.	We are investing £600,000 for staff autism training and professional development in schools and colleges.
Autistic people find it hard to get into and stay in work.	We know that wider challenges in the labour market may have made it even harder for autistic people to find or stay in a job.	We are working to ensure Jobcentres become more welcoming to autistic people , and are developing and testing new approaches through Health Model Offices.



Actions we are taking in the first year of our strategy as we move out of the pandemic (2021 – 2022)

The main inequalities autistic people face	How these inequalities manifested during COVID-19	Key actions we are taking to address this
Autistic people face significant health and care inequalities.	We know many people were already waiting longer than the recommended 13 weeks for their first assessment, but this has likely increased because some services were paused during the pandemic.	We are investing £13 million to test the most effective ways to reduce diagnosis waiting times.
Too many autistic people are being admitted to inpatient mental health settings.	Many autistic people have experienced even higher anxiety and worse mental health during the pandemic.	We are investing £40 million to improve community and crisis support, and are also investing an extra £18.35 million for crisis prevention and improvements in quality of inpatient support.
Autistic people who come into contact with the criminal justice system often have poor experiences.	Some autistic people reported being challenged by the police during the pandemic if they were not wearing masks, were going outside more than once a day or finding rules difficult to understand.	We are reviewing the Ministry of Justice’s call for evidence on neurodiversity , and developing a toolkit to educate frontline staff about neurodiversity.

In addition, we are focusing on enablers that are important in us being able to deliver on our vision for the next three years, which includes:

- Refreshing our governance structure for implementing the strategy,
- Publishing a cross-government data action plan to improve publicly collected data,
- Publishing a cross-government research action plan to identify gaps and increase the focus on autism research.



How you can help to make our vision for autistic people a reality at the local level

- ✓ The statutory guidance for implementing the adult autism strategy sets out your duties to support autistic adults at the local level in areas like social care, housing support and transition planning.
- ✓ It also tells you more about what you should be putting in place to make sure autistic adults' and their families' needs are heard locally, like Autism Partnership Boards.
- ✓ In addition, the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice sets out your duties to provide support to children with SEN, including those who are autistic.
- ✓ We also encourage you to look through the relevant actions in the new strategy for local government, and how you can spearhead changes in your local areas for autistic people as we move out of the pandemic.



How you can find out more about the autism strategy

- Read the new autism strategy:
 - [The national strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
- Find out more about what you should be doing to support autistic adults and children:
 - [Statutory guidance for Local Authorities and NHS organisations to support implementation of the Adult Autism Strategy \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
 - [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)
- Read our research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:
 - [The Impact of COVID-19 on Autistic People in the United Kingdom - Policy Innovation Research Unit \(piru.ac.uk\)](https://piru.ac.uk)

