Evaluating the Success of Connect to Autism Project

Final Report 2017

Executive Summary
1. **INTRODUCTION**

In November 2016 ERS was commissioned by The Autism Alliance UK to undertake an independent evaluation of the Connect to Autism Project as part of work linked to the Think Autism Strategy. The rationale for the Connect to Autism project was in response to the challenges faced by people with autism; who can be treated with incomprehension and mistrust and discriminated against and made to feel unwelcome.

The overall aim was to bring autism into the mainstream and to increase peoples’ wider awareness and understanding; to the benefit of individuals on the autistic spectrum and their families. The project aimed to deliver:

- A major advance towards: increasing the understanding of autism in venues which people with autism will visit; and giving people with autism the confidence that they will be welcomed and understood;
- Buy-in at national and local level from national chains, establishing successful pilot projects which can be taken forward in 2015-2016;
- Awareness-raising at local level, and the beginning of a transformation in social attitudes towards autism;
- Reduction in the social isolation experienced by people with autism, and greater integration into and participation in community activities;
- Greatly increased number of “autism-friendly” venues, with more to come in 2015-2016;
- Toolkits to help venues become autism-friendly;
- Recognised ‘autism friendly’ badge;
- Sign-up to a simple Autism Charter;
- Formation of local networks with a good prospect of sustainability in 2015-2016 and beyond;
- Listings and interactive maps showing autism-friendly venues across the country, with “Trip Advisor” ratings: the software for these ratings already exists on the Connect website; and
- Empowerment for people with autism through access to information on autism-friendly venues.

The project was led by The Autism Alliance UK; the largest network of UK autism charities, which collectively provide support to many thousands of people with autism and their families. The Autism Alliance UK was established in 1997 and is an umbrella body for specialist autism charities. The project was delivered by a number of regional/area based partners of Autism Alliance including:

- North East Autism Society
- Autism East Midlands
- Autism West Midlands
- Autism Anglia
- Autism Together (Wirral Autistic Society) covering parts of the North West region

The project was funded by the Department for Health through its Innovation Fund.
2. HEADLINE FINDINGS

Introduction

Overall, the Connect to Autism Project can be regarded as a successful project on the basis of achievement of the main contracted outputs and more importantly the clear added value that has been generated in making venues, including workplaces, much more autism friendly.

Whilst some elements have been more successful than others, overall the scale and scope of impact across organisations has been considerable. Simply put, the project has enabled a much greater reach into organisations that otherwise have not been achieved.

There is significant evidence to illustrate that the training led to the improved awareness and confidence of staff across organisations, which in turn has contributed to a more positive experience for individuals and their families; contributing to a host of wellbeing benefits, while building relationships between families and organisations. These experiences have created a raft of benefits to individuals and their families.

Moreover, a number of organisations felt that they were recognised as more accessible and approachable following the training, which meant some businesses had begun to recognise the commercial benefit and planned to finance training.

On this basis, there is now an acknowledged understanding of what can be achieved with relatively small amounts of funding. We understand that there remains an untapped market of organisations, employers and venues that could benefit if the project was replicated again tomorrow.

Project Set Up

Whilst the project initially took time to become established, the level of commitment from organisations had been impressive. The project intended to focus on a variety of employers, including larger organisations where the opportunity to reach a significant number of people provided economies of scale and value for money. While the project forged new relationships, previous partners, involved in ‘autism related’ activity some time ago, were also reconnected. The fact that the project was sponsorship from the Department of Health proved to be a key selling point.

Value for Money

The project is regarded as having provided exceptional value for money, both in terms of the immediate reach and impact, and the longer term impact that will be realised as a direct consequence of the project activity. Involvement with the project has certainly had positive benefits to the participating Autism Alliance UK members, including:

- Increased profile and reputation locally;
- Establishment of contacts and relationships with key organisations, employers and venues;
- Improved productivity via direct assistance and support to staff members on the autistic spectrum.
Whilst the offer of ‘free’ training is no longer available there is some evidence that some employers have returned and are willing to now pay for the training.

There is significant demand for further training across all organisations and several groups aim to incorporate mandatory training to expand on levels of good practice throughout the staff team which points to the longer term legacy of the project.

Some Autism Alliances partners have also developed a stand-alone course that can be delivered for a nominal fee, and there are signs that such an offer is attractive to some organisations requiring training. However, across the participating areas it is evident that a greater number of repeat inquiries were only interested in future sessions for new staff if the training continued to be free.

The Autism Connect online community continues to be a forum where people impacted by autism can openly and confidently share views and experiences on venues, etc. This is regarded as more ‘protected option’ than other social media platforms such as Facebook. Autism West Midlands continue to resource the Autism Connect site.

The view from project partners was mixed towards Autism Connect. While there was a clear appreciation of what it is intended to achieve, but also a recognition that more localised websites are very often more useable for people in a particular location. However, the high number of new registrations and the increasing membership base are testament to the value of the facility for many people.

**Improving Employability and Employment Opportunities**

The Connect to Autism project has developed the greater understanding within employers and their workforce of autism; in terms of the attributes that individuals can bring and the potential additional support needs they require.

Following the training it was recognised that some members of staff were on the autistic spectrum but had not previously realised this. This finding represents the wider impact of the training; placing staff in a stronger position to support and assist colleagues and, in some cases, encourage them to undergo a diagnosis to determine whether they are on the autistic spectrum.

Before the training, individuals with autism may not have approached management about the challenges in their role; however, we found evidence of examples there training sessions gave them the confidence to do so, with an assurance that management had an understanding of the issues they faced and how these might be resolved.

Supporting staff in their role could create a number of personal benefits, in terms of wellbeing and motivation, while improving productivity levels for the business.
Sustaining Momentum

The Innovation Fund has given Autism Alliance UK the opportunity to establish and develop relationships with many local organisations that previously had been difficult to engage due to lack of specific resources and an ‘affordable’ offer to stimulate interest. Some of the achievements will provide a lasting legacy without the requirement for any further intervention i.e. airport improvements, clear commitment to relaxed performances at theatres, etc.

Other examples of where momentum will be sustained include:

- To maintain this momentum, Nottingham Universities NHS Trust have formalised the Autism Awareness meetings into a regular meeting on their calendar with both our staff and practitioners, health care staff and administrators. It is intended that this initiative will lead to more opportunities for people with autism in employment, training, education and in the care they receive from our local health services.

- One partner has developed a regular e-newsletter which will be sent to ‘Local Champions’ that will serve to ensure that contact is maintained. The newsletter will include a listing of the autism-specific events in the region and updates on the ‘Connect to Autism’ and ‘Autism Connect’ projects. Champions will also contribute to the newsletter; sharing their experiences and suggesting ways of increasing the number of organisations that desire training to become more autism friendly.

- In 2016, Autism Anglia held an information day to raise awareness of relevant autism training for organisations (i.e. in the education, law and enforcement and hospitality sectors etc.). The day also provided ‘Local Champions’ and members of the Autism Alliance with the opportunity to share experiences and exchange ideas. The expectation is that such an event could take place annually, attracting local and regional media coverage.

It is likely that other relationships will require continued nurturing, and there is a commitment from Autism Alliance partners to engage in this, especially where this will lead to significant benefits to people with autism.

The following section outlines a number of case studies that demonstrate project activity.
3. CASE STUDIES

Introduction

The consultation has revealed a number of wider outcomes and impacts resulting from the autism awareness training; both from an organisation and employee perspective, and more widely from the experiences of customers, clients or members of the general public, tackling issues of misinterpretation and perhaps discrimination and mistrust.

The following case studies have been presented across a number of key headings including:

- Local authorities;
- Influencing employability and Improving Workplaces;
- Health and wellbeing;
- Widening opportunities for fun and leisure;
- Opening opportunities to travel;
- Improving Public Services and Higher Education;
- Faith groups; and
- The shopping experience.

The precise impact on people will be relevant to their own circumstances – for some the impact will be small, but for others much more significant. Certainly the impact of the investment will have been especially widespread.

Local Authorities

A number of local authorities from across the country participated in the project. Included below is a case study of activity in Durham.

Durham County Council

Through the project NEAS worked very closely with Durham County Council. The Chair of Durham County Council and Mayor of Durham City became champions and this increased a range a different agencies that we were able to work with in the Durham area. The North East Autism Society was invited to be members of the Autism Service Implementation Group which is chaired by a Commissioner of Durham County Council. This involvement has continued following cessation of the Connect to Autism project.

The complements wider training within the Durham area funded via Connect to Autism with beneficiaries including Durham Police, Durham CCG's, Durham Leisure Centres and Durham Gala Theatre.
Influencing Employability and Improving Workplaces

Working with Government

In 2015 the Department for Working Pensions (DWP) signed the Autism Charter. Through this project relationships have been developed with key Ministers from DWP and the Minister of State for Disabled People. As a result DWP agreed to work closely with the Alliance to implement several pieces of work within a two-year timeframe. This included:

- Ensuring staff are appropriately trained to help and support claimants with autism and associated hidden impairment conditions, throughout their journey to work, identifying and putting in place reasonable adjustment solutions at the earliest intervention;
- Supporting an increase in the number of individuals with autism and associated hidden impairments going into paid employment opportunities;
- Supporting Jobcentre Plus offices to identify ways that they can become more accessible with minimal investment and reasonable adjustments;
- Building the disability confidence of Jobcentre Plus staff when supporting people with autism and associated hidden impairment conditions;
- Enabling staff to be able to identify people with autism and associated hidden impairment conditions, some of whom may not have a formal diagnosis, and link them to appropriate support; and
- Creating an autism and neurodiversity toolkit and an autism passport for staff across DWP.

In total, it is expected that circa 750 job centres will have benefitted by 31st March 2017.

The purpose of the Autism/Hidden Impairment passport is to enable claimants to access and navigate DWP service provision from the very beginning of the process through to employment and retention. The passport enables each claimant to describe their condition and how best they can be supported.

NEAS has designed and developed an autism and neurodiversity toolkit - a resource to support awareness and understanding of autism spectrum conditions and providing practical guidance for supporting people who have neurodiversity conditions into employment. This toolkit also contains useful resources and additional local support contacts and organisations.

In March 2017 it was announced that the autism and neurodiversity toolkit and passport would not only be accessed by all staff at the DWP but it would be rolled out to every Government Department. The Connect to Autism project was the catalyst behind this significant achievement.
Rolls Royce Engineering Division

Rolls Royce (Derby campus) has around 12,000 employees, of which the engineering departments account for around 5,000. The project delivered autism awareness training sessions to managers within the engineering departments.

The project has been the catalyst for increased understanding within the trained managers of how to best support their employees with autism in their teams. Project activity led to a package of training for those managers who attended the awareness sessions, enabling them to deliver basic autism awareness training to their teams by the provision of a scripted session plan.

An audit of the built environment was also undertaken as the Derby Campus was undergoing significant refurbishment and redevelopment, and a move to a fully agile environment i.e. where staff move to different areas of workspace as opposed to remaining at a static desk space. The audit identified some areas of good practice and some areas for consideration, achieved through site visits and open discussions with senior staff responsible for the redevelopment work.

The desire for Rolls Royce to use the information from the environmental audit to inform building design specifications across the organisation – both highlighting what exists to support and what can be developed/improved. This will influence future building work, ensuring that consideration to the use of the built environment by employees with autism is proactive and standard, not considered afterwards. This includes signage design, the use of the agile environment, and the physical layouts and design.

The involvement of the business lead for global diversity and inclusion meant that consideration is given to how the work undertaken so far can be used across the organisation, not just in the UK divisions. For example, the lessons learnt from the project, in terms of an autism friendly site set-up, have been embedded in the company-wider ‘Brown Book’ that guides future operations. The impact has reached far beyond the UK and into countries such as India. There was also evidence of staff discussing autism on the company forum.

The positive relationship established between Autism East Midlands and Rolls Royce will extend beyond the remit of the Connect to Autism project and ensure that Rolls Royce has an expert voice to consult in the area of autism. This is already being evidenced in queries around recruitment and employment opportunities in Derby. A specific example is a manager approaching someone involved with the project to request where they could advertise a vacancy to ensure people with autism are able to access it and make an application.
Unison

Following an initial meeting the project has been supported by Unison, opening up new avenues to deliver the project. This relationship has enabled Autism East Midlands to target a range of sectors including healthcare, police and public sector roles as well as the field of mainstream education.

“I wanted to thank you for your help and support over the last month which has meant that a hundred and two people have received Autism Awareness training within Unison. Lincolnshire Police and G4S during the two sessions at Force HQ and this training is now being followed up across the East Midlands Police Forces after the feedback from our joint partnership events.” Lincolnshire Unison Branch Learning Coordinator

“The Autism Awareness Workshops have had a huge positive impact on our members working within Health / Policing/ Education/ Private and Voluntary Sector as these workplaces by their very nature of their jobs are in the front line and dealing with the general public on a daily basis. The Autism Awareness Workshops have enabled an understanding of the Autism Spectrum and how each person who is Autistic is unique. The workshops have highlighted to the employers within the sectors that they can sign up to the charter and have a work place audit which will identify ways to make them a better employer and have a better understanding of Autism.”

Debbie Kitt-Geraghty, Local Organiser, UNISON Notts County Branch

Widening Opportunities for Fun and Leisure

Notts County FC

An audit instigated through the Connect to Autism project led to a number of direct improvements including: better signage for the toilets at the back of the family stands in signage for the food outlets; there were designated areas to stand drinks and add sugar and milk, plus more pictures to show the food on offer. In the stands there are now reserved seats at the end of rows and to the rear of the Derek Pavis stand which can be booked for use by individuals with autism.

Notts County subsequently installed two sensory rooms at the stadium and as a direct impact Nottingham Forest were encouraged to follow suit - an example of the catalytic impact of the project.

“We already have a number of exec boxes that are to adapted for use as sensory rooms with the potential of a fourth exec room to be used as either a tuck shop/or quiet space etc. We look forward to hearing from you in due course. Many thanks, once more, for all of your support.” Beverley Markland, Human Resources Manager, Notts County FC.
Norwich Theatre Royal

Norwich Theatre Royal initially contacted Autism Anglia as they were considering putting on relaxed pantomime performances. Training for their front of house staff and volunteers was provided and advice given on putting together visual support aids. For each relaxed pantomime performance they produce a ‘social journey’ booklet about the pantomime and what to expect. When booking seats patrons are asked to telephone the box office to purchase tickets so that they can discuss individual needs before allocating seats. Not all seats are put on sale, recognising that people with autism do not like to have other people too close to them.

Prior to the show all patrons purchasing tickets received a letter explaining what the Theatre offers and a list of special effects and sounds and when they occur. This all helped prepare the person with autism for their trip.

Norwich Theatre Royal also make available pre-show visits to look around and a quiet room with just some soft seating for patrons to use should they need to as a result of sensory overload and not being able to cope with the auditorium. People can come and go as they wish from the auditorium during the performance. In addition, the pantomime is relayed to plasma screens throughout the theatre allowing anyone not able to cope with the auditorium to still see the show.

People with autism were allowed to wear ear defenders / ear phones to reduce sound, can use their tablets, iPads or mobile phones as an aid to managing their time at the theatre and in some cases as their means of communication. In addition, lights in the auditorium are kept on throughout the performance.

Autism Anglia was invited to a pantomime performance to advise on possible adaptations and changes to any parts that may cause people with autism distress and sensory overload.

At their pantomime in 2016 four children with autism all went on stage to take part in the ‘sing-a-long’ and talk to some of the cast. For all these children it was the first time they had ever done this and for two of them it was the first time at the Theatre.
**Everton FC - Sarah's Story**

“Daniel is nearly 10 and is in mainstream school. Daniel gets quite angry and emotional a lot of the time and this is something we work with. Sometimes you know in advance that there’ll be a trigger. Sometimes it will be something you hadn’t thought of. Even something slightly different can upset him, such as asking him to do his wash and brush his teeth. He knows he has to brush his teeth when he washes, you see, so asking him separately will upset him. When he gets angry it escalates quickly and sometimes I don’t realise I’ve done something wrong.

It’s just me and Daniel on our own at home. I try to do a lot when he’s in school. Otherwise, just going to the supermarket takes twice as long and I can’t finish. There are too many people there and someone only has to nudge him as they go past - he doesn't like being touched. Even if someone does it by accident, there's a meltdown. If he has a meltdown when we are out he will run. It is a danger.

Daniel supports Everton although he went through a Liverpool phase. If he hears someone says Liverpool he changes his mind for the day - but at heart he’s an Evertonian. He'd never been to a game until recently and I honestly didn't know how he'd react. But he asked me to take him. He said, 'We can get seats on our own and I'll take my ear defenders.' He didn't want anyone to sit by him or touch him. He thought about that a lot before we were even going and I had to explain that he might have someone next to him.

The day we were going he wrote a story about it for me. He wrote that he had stomach pains because he didn’t know what it was going to be like. He was thinking there would be loads of people and it would be noisy. When we got there, I spoke to a lady on the gate. She said that Goodison Park was trying to be more autism friendly and that they’d had training.

She let us in through a door because Daniel didn’t like the turnstile. He was a bit reluctant as he didn't know what was on the other side, but she got him through. She said there was emergency seating if needed and then added that she couldn't do anything about the noise, which was funny. We totally understood that!

Then she passed us onto someone else and we were escorted through the crowds to our seats. We were on the end near an exit and the steward stood near us and kept, very subtly, looking at me and saying are you OK. Daniel started crying when people were shouting but we overcame it. He had his headphones and listened to music on his phone.

We stayed for whole match - that's amazing. I really didn’t think I'd get him in there, never mind staying for the whole thing! Daniel did well. Now he’s asked for a home game season ticket. I never thought I’d get him in and now he wants to go back! He wrote a story when we got home about the nice people who helped us.”
The Sage Gateshead

Sage Gateshead is a concert venue and a centre for musical education that has developed relaxed musical performances for families with autism. Sage Gateshead showcased their first relaxed performance in December 2015, with an attendance of over 500 people. Sage wants to embed relaxed sessions into all areas of performance such as classical, orchestral, family learning and music.

“It means a lot when organisations decide to host relaxed performances. We attended the relaxed performance of The Snowman at Sage Gateshead, at Christmas and it was fantastic. This was the first musical concert that we’ve been too. The main thing is being able to take the kids somewhere where people won’t stare. Making the reasonable adjustments helped Ed have a normal experience without feeling like he’s sticking out.” Parent of a child with autism.

“We are committed to trying to help more people to gain access to live music and creating relaxed performances is one way in which we can do this. Our venue has won numerous awards for accessibility and we wish to ensure that our programme content matches this. As an organisation we value working with expert partners to inform our programme and staff training.” Dawn Williams, Health and Social Care Strategy Leader, Sage Gateshead.

Peppercorns Catering

Peppercorns Catering was planning to set up a weekly session for people with special needs at their Puzzle Piece café. They wanted to improve the experience for people with autism, aware of the need to balance this with the experience for all customers. Following training, the drive to become autism-friendly has gone from strength to strength. Staff have adopted learning from the training into practical improvements, including:

- The production of a visual walk through for their two café/deli premises. This is available on their website and enables people to see the entrance, where to order their food, what the seating area looks like and location of the toilets;
- The logo used for the Puzzle Piece Café is placed onto the staff name badges to show who has received the autism awareness training and will be able to provide extra support. This is a subtle but clear way of enabling people to identify staff with the additional skills; and
- The production of easy to read visual menus accompanied by photographs of the food/drink next to the text and price.

The impact from just one session of autism awareness training, coupled with the commitment of company leadership and staff, has had a long lasting and very real impact for people within their local communities who have autism and their families.
Colchester United Football Club

The involvement of Colchester United Football Club in the Connect to Autism project has had a direct impact on fans. The club was contacted by a father who regularly attends matches with his son. Staff members, who had received training, advised them on the most appropriate seats in the ground to watch the game. On the basis of such a positive experience they then became season ticket holders.

They were also invited to attend the season launch event for the re-branding of the football league to the English Football League, to discuss their experiences as fans. This publicity may have helped to improve the Club’s reputation; encouraging the attendance of individuals and their families by fostering an autism friendly environment.

Tate Liverpool - Lesley's Story

“My youngest son, Dylan, eight, has been diagnosed with social communication disorder. Some days he is wonderful to be around but others he’s a nightmare. We can never predict what kind of day it’s going to be. He could wake up in the morning and his teddy bear could fall off his bed - and the rest of the day would be ruined.

We visit museums sometimes. Dylan loves the touchy-feely parts of the older museums, like the World Museum. When we heard the Tate Liverpool had become an Autism Champion and was having an autism-friendly session we thought, great, we can be hands-on and make a mess!

Someone met us at the door of the Tate. The lady said that if we needed anything at all, we could ask her for help. It was a relaxed session; basically an open space with lots of activities and a big plastic sheet on the floor. They'd laid out big blocks of wax and clay. You could make monsters - the wax was softer to use but Dylan preferred the cold clay. When you’d made your monster, you put your model on a projector and the monster came alive on the wall. It was fantastic.

The Tate staff let us stay as long as we wanted, so the kids went back and forth to the projector. They were totally engrossed. The whole session felt warm. There were other parents and kids there and you could tell by the reassuring smiles that they understood how you felt”.

Opening Opportunities to Travel

Birmingham City Airport

A number of children on the autistic spectrum had previously had a negative experience travelling through the airport. During the autism training it became clear that the areas which were the most stress inducing were airport customs and the duty free lounge. As a result staff members in these areas would attend the awareness training to ensure individuals and their families could be approached and supported in the most appropriate manner. Fiddle tools were also made available to give children a purpose while travelling through the airport.

Following the training, a series of airport tours have been offered to prospective passengers to navigate through the different stages of check in. Following the tours, the experience of families had improved due to the calm, supportive and reassurance nature of staff members and some children had no longer needed to take medication before getting on a flight. A short video has been produced, which focuses on the experiences of a father and son, who is on the autistic spectrum, making their way through the airport. The airport was in fact the first in Europe to broadcast a video of this nature.

The video can be viewed via this link

The feedback from members of the public has been very positive and the airport has also been supported by Autism West Midlands to produce written booklets, available as downloadable pdf documents, to provide guidance to families.

Newcastle International Airport

Newcastle International Airport has signed the Autism Charter which means families using the region’s main hub airport will now have an easier, less daunting experience. All permanent Passenger Assistance airport staff has been trained to understand autism and how they can better support passengers or their family members who have autism, while using the airport. Work included the creation of a downloadable ‘Airport Autism Passport’, completed and then brought to the Passenger Assistance Desk on arrival. This ensures a ‘fast track’ service for the family, avoiding queues and crowded areas, which can be distressing for people with autism. Families also have the choice to board first, or last, as transitioning from one place to another can be a particularly difficult time for people with autism.

“We are delighted to be able to partner with the NEAS to make the small changes that will have a big impact on people with autism. We are hoping that by the summer holidays there will be nothing now stopping families using the airport or having the holidays they deserve” Newcastle International Airport Chief Executive, David Laws.
Liverpool John Lennon Airport - April's Story

“Since the age of eight, I have been become accustomed to procedures at airports that are immensely daunting to anyone, like me, with Asperger’s syndrome. The regular pat down, the endless queues for no apparent logical reason, the complete and utter flaunt of the ‘one metre of personal space’ rule. Not to mention the instances where strange people instruct you to do various different things, such as take off your shoes or take off your belt.

Liverpool John Lennon Airport, my most accessible port of call, has recently undergone a transformation of sorts. They have signed up to the Autism Champions scheme, which is a promise made to assist individuals on the spectrum in response to the stressors in an airport environment. Adjustments are made so that passengers are treated equitably in accordance to their need, and it’s important to note that this strategy not only helps people on the spectrum, but it also applies to passengers with guide dogs, or those with Alzheimer’s, for instance.

When I booked my holiday to Fuerteventura online with my partner Alex, by chance we came across the airport’s autism awareness scheme. Alongside providing an online guide – very useful for Alex who seldom uses airline travel - they also provide autism awareness vouchers for people on the spectrum, or for families who may find these situations difficult. You can show these vouchers at the airport and get extra help. The vouchers influenced my decision as, although I rarely encounter problems these days, there is always the chance that I will relapse. It’s a thought that makes me anxious.

But back to today. I find going through airport security very stressful. Liverpool have put in place a lot of visual structure telling people which lane they need to go to and, alongside the Fast Track lane, there is also a lane for people with disabilities.

The prospect of a possible ‘deep search’ at security can be awful for an autistic individual. When I told the Liverpool staff I am autistic, they made some simple adjustments, such as giving me time and space to take off my shoes.

In a way, I see Duty Free as my reward for going through security; be that as it may, most airport Duty Free sections present problems for those on the spectrum. We can be overwhelmed by all of the clashing scents. Liverpool specifically separates these products into a logical order to soften the impact as much as logistically possible. For those who find it all a bit too much, there are also quiet areas in the airport.”
Health and Wellbeing

Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust

The Connect to Autism was the catalyst to the commencement of productive improvements across two hospitals in Nottingham. From an introductory email to the Consultant Paediatrician and Autism Pathway Lead Clinician for Children and Young People in February 2015, it was agreed to initially deliver four training sessions. After feedback and further consultation with the Hospital Trust further training sessions have been provided to 400 staff and 12 ward audits were undertaken.

What began as the Autism Awareness Initiative Project meetings are now included in the formal calendar of meetings and will continue as the Autism Access Group meetings. Members of these meetings include a key representative from the Learning Disability team, HR, Matrons, Clinicians, Marketing and Communications departments as well as the Equality and Diversity Lead. Autism East Midlands will also be present. Adjustments following the environmental audits will be considered by this group and budget depending changes will be made.

Following the audit the hospitals have removed all their ‘clocks from patients’ bedsides. These were to notify next meds/next visit from a doctor etc. However these were found to be the cause of anxiety to all patients as they were rarely up to date. Signage on the main hospital entrances has been improved. The Trust has also ensured that autism awareness is specifically mentioned in their new induction training video, for all hospital staff either medical/clerical or ancillary.

On the basis of a recommendation from the NHS Trust to the Nottinghamshire NHS Equality and Engagement Network, further training was provided to 46 health professional people including Forensic CPN, Youth Offending Nurse, Cognitive Behaviour Therapists and Community nurses. It is still under discussion but it is hoped that in the future new/trainee doctors would have the Autism Awareness training as part of their mandatory course.

“Working with Autism East Midlands through the delivery of autism awareness training and environmental assessments has been hugely beneficial for inclusion at the Trust. It has given real meaning to the Trust’s Statutory Public Sector Equality Duties, in advancing equality, eliminating discrimination and fostering good relations between different people. The levels of interest shown in the autism awareness training have been unprecedented for an equality and diversity initiative – with staff coming forward wanting to get more involved in the work and improve the clinical environment for patients with autism, particularly in paediatrics. We would hope to continue this work subject to funding.” Giles Matsell, Head of Equality and Diversity, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust
James Paget University Hospital

The Connect to Autism project training and ongoing support from Autism Anglia has enabled the hospital to develop a flagging system and hospital passports, which includes documented records for individuals with autism and their anxieties.

The hospital has established dedicated anaesthetists to support individuals and side rooms are also available for people who may be suffering with heightened anxiety in the hospital setting.

There are also dedicated general anaesthetic lists for individuals that find it challenging to undergo endoscopy tests and the Hospital website has also been updated; including autism and learning disabilities web page. The hospital has also requested feedback from patients following their treatment and has also received specific email responses from patients, parents or carers.

Health Action focus groups have been coordinated, which include service users and advocates, to reflect on the feedback from patients and the support they have received.

Following the training and subsequent adaptions to services, a review by the Care Quality Commission revealed that the hospital now delivers outstanding work for patients with autism, which demonstrates the far reaching impact of connect to autism across the services of hospital; improving the quality of care and support for patients and family members.

Supporting the Public Sector and Higher Education

Bedfordshire Police

Autism Anglia was approached by Bedfordshire Police. This was partly driven by an incident between two officers and a young man with autism in Luton. This established a conversation about the Autism Charter and Bedfordshire Police became the first force in the country to sign up. The first session was delivered to the Chief Constable, his senior team and the Police and Crime Commissioner. Plans are in place for Autism Anglia and the police to develop an in house ‘train the trainer’ package which will make the issue of continuous staff training on autism more sustainable.

De Montfort University

De Montfort University has a high number of students with autism and provide a range of strategies and support to successfully engage with learners pre-entry, and during their time at the university. This includes taster days and full three day residential tasters for those with confirmed places. The university recognised that there was a need for awareness raising within both the academic and professional teams to further enhance both the skills of those staff, and the support then available to students.

As a result of this partnership working there has been an emerging emphasis on the progression into employment students with autism. The university and Autism East Midlands have been increasingly engaging with local employers to raise awareness of the benefits of employing people with autism, increasing the range of opportunities for students leaving university, and raising their aspirations to what is available to them as successful graduates.
Faith Groups

Colchester Episcopal Church

Following the training, a small group from the church has developed an explanatory document to provide other members and the wider congregation with information on autism, the autistic spectrum and how individuals can be supported. The group also intends to provide information on the website; including an overview of what to expect on attending the church and how to support family members who may on the autistic spectrum. The church is aware that meetings must be friendly and accessible for individuals on the autistic spectrum.

The Shopping Experience

Clarks at New Mersey Retail Park - Debbie's Story

“My son Harry is eight. He was born with global development delays and has many of the same traits as someone with autism. At the shops, he makes loud noises and people stare and he gets stressed and upset in queues. We try to go to as many places as we can, but it's hard. We hear a lot of tutting. When Harry's in his buggy lots of people are understanding but in restaurants you can tell people are thinking that he's just an unruly child. You have to have a tough skin but it can be upsetting. I wish people were more accepting.

Just like any other child, Harry needs shoes and they need to be properly fitted. It was an absolute godsend to find out that Clarks at New Mersey Retail Park in Speke offer an autism-friendly shoe-fitting service through the Liverpool Autism Champions scheme. We booked a slot at 9am on a Sunday. The lights were dim and it was really quiet. The staff let Harry explore the shop first then, when he was ready, they tried to measure his feet. He was more interested in the iPad they were using to record the measurements, so they found a spare one for him to experiment with.

One of the assistants, Amy, was so gentle with Harry. He taught her how to sign ‘thank you' and 'I'm fine'. She came down to his level and was gentle and soft and even when he was snatching at the iPad she wasn't fazed. Harry tried on loads and loads of shoes then went behind the cash registers and rang up his own shoes before putting them into a bag. He was thrilled. He got school shoes with flashing lights on them and pumps for PE plus some trainers for out of school. The Clarks staff had had to come in early and set up the shop. They went the extra mile for us: there was no queuing and no noise. We felt as if we were important to them and it was really good. We'll go there all the time now.”