

Getting needs assessments for autistic adults right from the start

A guide for local authorities in England on training social care professionals



This guide was produced as part of the first cross-sector partnership on autism. The partnership is funded by the Department of Health and co-chaired by The National Autistic Society and the Autism Alliance, bringing together key stakeholders to improve outcomes for autistic people and their families.



Why we have produced this guide

Autistic adults tell us that they often struggle to access the help and support that they need. This can have a significant impact on their lives, their independence and, in the worst cases, lead to social isolation. It is vital that autistic adults get the right support at the right time, and key to unlocking this is support from professionals who understand them, their needs and their condition.

The National Autistic Society wanted to uncover some of the issues behind this and provide local authorities with more information about how they can make sure they have staff with the right training and understanding. We interviewed nine local authorities and held a round table discussion with others to find out how they approach training. We sought to identify their challenges and how they overcame them.

This guide aims to assist local authorities to improve the skills and knowledge of their social care assessors and gives useful examples of good practice.

It is not prescriptive, as consultation with various local authorities and health services showed that there are several ways to organise social care teams and it is clear there is no “one size fits all” approach. It is also important to remember that it is for local authority commissioners, individual social workers and elected councillors alike to help ensure that the right questions are being asked and actions are taken to maintain a well-trained social care workforce.

Why is it important for staff carrying out needs assessments to have autism training?

It meets legal duties

A good needs assessment leading to the right support can reduce risks for local authorities, helping them meet their legal and statutory obligations, including:

- The *Autism Act (2009)*, which put responsibility on the Government to produce:
 - an adult autism strategy, to improve services for autistic adults
 - statutory guidance for local councils and local health bodies underpinning the strategy.
- The statutory guidance implementing the adult autism strategy puts duties on local authorities and health bodies about what actions to take to meet the needs of autistic adults living in their area. This was last updated in March 2015 to reflect changes to the autism strategy in *Think Autism*. In particular, the statutory guidance outlines that staff carrying out needs assessments require an advanced level of training.
- Under the *Care Act*, local authorities have a duty to carry out an assessment for an individual who appears to have a need for care and support. Regulations under the *Care Act* also state that an assessment must be carried out by someone with sufficient training in an individual's condition – reinforcing the *Autism Act*.
- Other duties, including the *Equality Act*, *Mental Capacity Act* and *Mental Health Act*, also apply. It is also important to remember NHS England's *Transforming Care* programme, and the need to provide support across the autism spectrum to prevent inappropriate admissions to mental health hospitals.

It leads to better assessments and outcomes

Improved autism understanding of social care assessors leads to better outcomes for autistic people, and benefits local authorities and local Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) in providing cost-effective solutions to meeting eligible needs.

Without a clear understanding of autism, it is hard for social care assessors to appropriately apply eligibility

criteria for care and support and to understand the impact of autism on someone's day-to-day life – like preparing meals, maintaining the home, managing money and self-care. It is also difficult for them to adjust the assessment process and communicate with autistic people effectively. But if an assessment is done well, the needs of the autistic person are readily identified and they will get the right support early on. This will promote individuals' independence, improve their outcomes and reduce the cost of support packages.

It meets outcomes in a cost-effective way

Identifying the right support early based on a good needs assessment can also be cost-effective, particularly by preventing further needs developing. By correctly identifying the needs of an autistic person as early as possible, more appropriate, and often lower levels of support can be provided or self-management supported. In fact, National Audit Office research found that identifying and supporting just eight per cent of autistic adults with fewer support needs or Asperger syndrome could **save the public purse in England £67 million per year**.¹ Within this total, the **savings are highest for local authorities** by increasing the likelihood of independent living.

Training is key to making sure legal duties are met and that the right support is put in place early.



1 National Audit Office (2009), *Supporting people with autism through adulthood*

Kent County Council told us how they use trained assessors to identify support to enable autistic people to live more independently and how this is cost-effective.

What Kent County Council told us

Kent County Council has an Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) Team for autistic adults who don't have a learning disability. The services offered by the Kent ASC team include social care assessments, short-term interventions, longer-term support planning and specialist information, advice and guidance. They also provide consultancy to other professionals and groups.

Kent's analysis found that better identification and assessment of autistic people helps to meet personal outcomes and proves cost-effective overall. Specialist assessment and intervention can reduce costs because support can be targeted to specific needs and the impact of a condition can be thoroughly explored with the individual.

Kent evidenced their cost-effectiveness in two ways – within an analysis of high-cost package reductions following specialist assessment, and within the Kent specialist ASC enablement approach. Kent's enablement approach has been the subject of a recent two-year social research project and provided short-term support for people to help them lead independent and fulfilling lives. The service works with individuals for 12 weeks to give them the skills and confidence to complete their personal goals. The Spectrum (Outcome Star)² was one of the main assessment tools used, along with the county's statutory assessment and cost-setting forms, and self-esteem and carers' impact.

The enablement approach was occupational therapy-led and tailored to each individual.

A sensory profile assessment was usually provided and then, dependent on the individual's needs and how they presented, staff might complete a communication and interaction assessment, assessment of motor processing skills, or a checklist of roles and interests. Assistive technology, telecare, phone apps and weighted clothing were all used to assist people in their wellbeing and self-management. The enablement team also provided hands-on support using each individual's personal learning styles in areas such as day-to-day living, travel training and employment support.

At the end of the programme, most trial participants found they could manage with low levels of support. Individuals' outcomes were generally successfully met and, on average, packages of care and support were much reduced – in cost terms by over 60% within the 12 weeks of provision – and then sustained.

Kent has committed to developing their autism team further and will shortly bring other agencies and teams including criminal justice, employment, family support and carer support into an autism 'alliance'. The Kent strategy also aims to identify training gaps and recognises the need for more specialist training, including for social care assessors.

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What should training for assessors include and how do you set it up?

Local authorities organise adult social work teams in different ways. Some have specialist autism teams that work exclusively with autistic adults. Others will have generic social work teams whose case work will include, but not be limited to, autistic people. The way that local authorities meet their training obligations will therefore also be different and need to suit the way the team works.

Some of the local authorities we spoke to have a centralised training budget, and social care teams will need to put up a business case for autism training for their staff. Other local authorities allocate the training budget to teams, who then commission the training.

Planning for training

No matter how social care in local authorities is organised, the first step is to identify autism training needs, but how this is done will vary. With any structure, training of assessors should be included in local autism strategies. Consulting with your Autism Partnership Board is also helpful.

Skills for Care³ have developed a framework that identifies three levels of autism skills and knowledge.

- **Basic awareness** – the basic knowledge and skills required for all non-specialist staff whose roles may bring them into contact with autistic people. This includes the key characteristics of autism and the common sensory differences.
- **Intermediate knowledge and skills** following on from the basic level and aimed at staff who have frequent or intensive contact with autistic people. This focuses on adapting communication, recognising stress or sensory needs and being able to support an autistic person's development.
- **Specialist development** – skills for specialist workers or workers in specialist services. These focus on the skills required to assess an autistic person's needs and plan services.

This is a useful framework to adopt across your health and social care teams. Applying the legal duties on training in the *Care Act* and *Autism Act* statutory guidance, a social care assessor should be trained to the **specialist level**.



You should consider, given your team's structure:

- **How many autistic people are in your area?**
You should be recording autism within your Joint Strategic Needs Assessments. Tools such as POPPI⁴ and PANSI⁵ can help local commissioners identify their local populations.
- **How many social care assessments does your team carry out with autistic people?**
You will need to make sure you have enough well-trained people to meet the number of assessments needed.
- **Are you a specialist or general social work team?**
In a specialist team, everyone will require specialist training, while in general teams, a proportion of the team will need it.
- **How many specialists does your team need?**
In a general team, you need sufficient specialists to conduct assessments for autistic people. Having identified how many assessments your team carries out for autistic people, you should ensure at all times that sufficient specialist trained assessors are available to carry out a comprehensive needs assessment. This will support increased cost-effectiveness by identifying and supporting needs early.
- **What about non-specialists?**
All health and care staff should receive training in autism, as a statutory requirement. For most non-specialist assessors, an intermediate level will be sufficient. However, training must include knowing when to bring in specialist support, especially when the team works on a single point of access model.

3 www.skillsforcare.org.uk/autism

4 Projecting Older People Population Information System (POPPI) www.poppi.org.uk

5 Projecting Adult Needs and Service Information System (PANSI) www.pansi.org.uk

What training and continuing professional development should include



Without a clear understanding of autism, it is hard for social care assessors to appropriately apply eligibility criteria for care and also difficult for them to adjust the assessment process and communicate with autistic people effectively. But backed up with the right training and understanding, an assessment will accurately capture the needs of the autistic person, enabling the right support as early as possible.

Social workers carrying out assessments for autistic people will need specialist training. Developing that training will involve considering the following things:

- **Content.** Training should be relevant and based on the experiences of assessing autistic people's needs that social workers have had. It must cover:
 - communication needs and how to adapt your communication
 - challenges processing information
 - sensory needs
 - that needs might fluctuate
 - how other conditions and diagnoses affect an autistic person and how they present
 - how all the above can be supported in the context of an assessment and in day-to-day life (ie what services might support someone).

The local authorities we talked to also said that the following information is important:

- showing a number of different experiences that reflect the autism spectrum
- knowledge of the *Mental Capacity Act* and how it will apply
- an understanding that an assessment only gives you a snapshot of someone's life
- breaking preconceptions of what you think autism is, stereotypes or popular portrayals.

- **Training providers.** There are many providers of training available. However, in deciding who to commission, you should:
 - ensure they have the experience required to provide **specialist** training
 - have experience of the context of social care assessment
 - have direct input from autistic people into the training (eg consulting, delivering or co-delivering the training)
 - be explicit with the training providers. Take them through what you need. Courses should be tailored accordingly.

You may also find it useful to ask other local authorities what providers they have used.

- **Reflective practice.** Training is just the start. Managers should follow up with their staff to ask how they have applied their training. Training participants should reflect on their practice and identify further opportunities to develop their skills. Consider forming local communities of practice.
- **Post-training support.** Local authorities told us that training is best when it is reflected and reinforced in practice. This can be realised by providing post-training support in the form of top tips, crib sheets, toolkits, guides, use of mentors and champions or post-training supported supervision. Some of these are available at www.autism.org.uk/about/strategy/resources.
- **Evaluation.** Consider how you will make sure the training was effective. This can be ascertained through feedback from participants, staff questionnaires and reviewing training programmes to ensure they are fit for purpose.

There is more information about this available at www.autism.org.uk/about/strategy/resources.



How to deliver training

The local authorities we spoke to had different approaches. These were not mutually exclusive and some local authorities adopted a mix of the following:

- **Tailored instructor-led training.** This may take the form of workshops or seminars for social care assessors by a training provider. It may be modular or one-off training. Classroom training is an efficient method of presenting a large body of material to large or small groups of employees. This is more personal and allows the trainer to recount their own experiences. It also enables group discussion and reflection. Several of the local authorities we spoke to told us this format is particularly useful as it allows for questions and answers.
- **Train the trainer.** This model provides not only the knowledge that assessors might need, but also for them to go on to train their colleagues. It was particularly useful for some of the local authorities we spoke to who had large general social work teams. This is the model used in Surrey's autism champion network described on page 10.
- **Once trained, coaches can answer questions, suggest more effective strategies, correct errors and provide support and feedback to their wider team. This is particularly important in the context of social care assessments, as it ensures that there is someone with specialist training in the team who can help.**
- **Mentoring.** For ongoing support and reflective practice, mentoring or buddy schemes can be useful. Local authorities also told us that shadowing other assessors is one of the best ways to learn. These can help make sure that good practice is shared widely.
- **E-learning.** Online training has the advantage of being easy to use and cost-effective. However, the local authorities we spoke to felt that it may not meet the in-depth learning needs of social care assessors. It is most useful in meeting basic autism awareness training needs, or as a refresher.

Lancashire County Council gave us more detail about the tiered approach they take to training and some of the resources they have produced.

What Lancashire County Council told us

The Lancashire Autism Partnership Board is responsible for implementing the autism strategy. Work is organised into different themes with different multi-agency subgroups taking responsibility for diagnosis, assessment and support planning, and learning development needs and autism awareness. Subgroups will identify, as part of their training plan, what areas may need to be prioritised and require fast track training (eg looking at a particular cohort, or specialist training such as forensic or social care assessor teams or teams dealing with discharge of patients as a result of *Transforming Care*).

Lancashire commissions two levels of training:

- An introduction to autism for people with little or no knowledge of autism. This may include newly appointed social workers in the Learning Disability and Autism Team or within in-house Disability Services, some of whom may have an interest in working with autistic people but have limited experience of doing so.
- More specialised autism training for those such as social care assessors who require more in-depth understanding and knowledge to support front line delivery.

While they are waiting for training, social workers draw upon their social work experience and practice and the expertise of their peers.

Lancashire County Council are currently reviewing the training programmes to ensure they are fit for purpose and pitched at the right levels to ensure:

- there is a baseline understanding
- communication, processing, sensory and stability (ie little or no change) needs are understood and managed well in practice.

The diagnosis, assessment and support planning subgroup plans to draft a questionnaire for people who use services after their assessment, and one of the questions will deal with their understanding of the assessment process. Feedback from the questionnaire will enable staff to take account of bad practices as well as identify what works well.

The Autism Partnership Board subgroups will also ask for examples of case studies that either highlight best practice or identify issues for discussion in each of their groups and this may be adopted into training or best practice.

For example, the diagnosis, assessment and support planning subgroup went through social work assessment forms and identified where they were unclear. One of the questions on the needs assessment form under “Finance” was “Can you use the internet?”. The team highlighted that this question was too closed and could generate a yes answer (indicating no need for support) that would not elicit information about problems with using the internet for finances.

To assist social care assessors, the diagnosis, assessment and support planning subgroup intend to draft a supplementary guide around the needs assessment questions that will help elicit better information about the needs of the autistic person being assessed.

The subgroup also intends to draft a letter to be sent to the autistic person prior to the assessment, outlining what to expect from the process.

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For more examples and resources visit www.autism.org.uk/about/strategy/resources.

Overcoming challenges

Some of the local authorities we spoke to told us more about some of the challenges that make it difficult to ensure social care assessors have a full understanding of autism. Staff shortages, high caseloads, limited training funds and day-to-day work demands can mean training may be seen as costly in terms of time and money and can become less of a priority. This can be particularly difficult for small local authorities. We asked them how they overcame this.

They told us training should be viewed as an investment that is good for autistic people, for staff and for local authorities. Often, they had persuaded senior managers to dedicate resource by highlighting that:

- This will enable and empower people to play the role they want to play in their community. As an overall aim, this should be the goal for a local authority.
- Local authorities can better meet the expectations of autistic people and their families.

- It can ensure the assessment process works first time for autistic people. Autistic people will thus get the right support at the right time, improving their outcomes.
- An autistic person's needs may fluctuate. A well-trained assessor will be able to work with an autistic person to identify their needs throughout day-to-day life, not just on the day of the assessment. Again, this enables appropriate support earlier.
- It is good for staff, increasing their skills, knowledge and understanding of autism and providing them with the tools and strategies to support autistic people confidently. Within integrated care pathways, it will allow for better referrals to support.
- It is also good at a strategic level for commissioners. It prevents the need for crisis-led and often high-cost interventions and lowers the risk of legal challenge if staff get it wrong. This makes services and support more cost-effective.

Surrey County Council have an autism champion network, which they have established at low cost and often using volunteers to train staff. Their efforts mean that the training is valued across the organisation.

What Surrey County Council told us

Surrey County Council has 11 locality based social care teams based in 11 districts and boroughs, plus a county-wide transition team. While there is autism expertise within those teams, Surrey draws upon an autism champions' network to ensure consistency across all teams. Surrey is aware of its legal obligations under the *Care Act*, the *Autism Act*, the autism strategy and the statutory guidance and proactively explores ways to improve assessment outcomes. Importantly, they also recognise that there are financial savings from getting support right for autistic people. They appreciate the importance and value of ensuring all locality teams are committed to autism training.

Autism champion training is prioritised and available to all – health professionals, social care professionals, post-16 schools, sixth forms, colleges and universities, police, probation officers, and providers of residential care, supported living and community day activities.

The training is undertaken in small groups, each led by a mentor who is a local expert. Mentors come from a variety of backgrounds – health, social care, charity sector providers and private sector providers. The trainers use agreed training materials, and the trainee autism champions bring issues from their workplaces as examples and case studies as part of their training. This allows each trainee to get feedback from their mentor, and adapt their practice in response to what they have learnt, and makes the training very relevant for champions in their varied roles and workplaces.

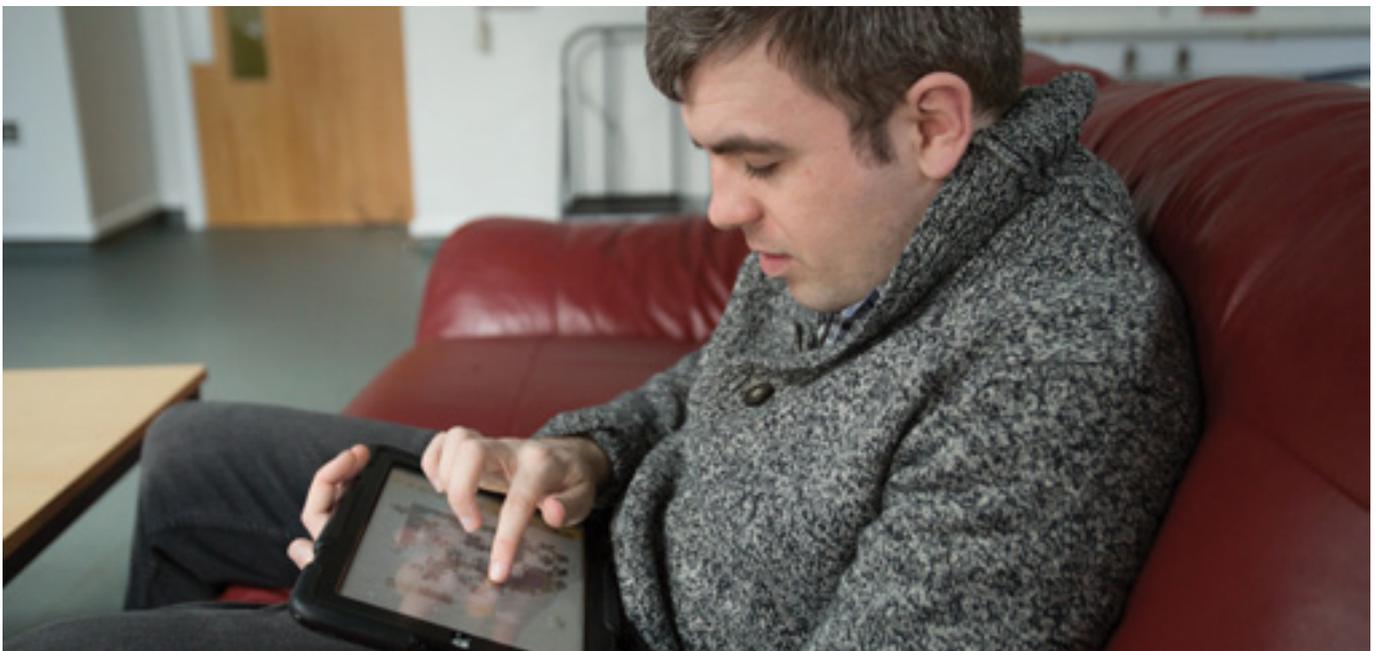
Surrey adopted a train-the-trainer approach. Once the autism champion is trained, they become the autism lead for their team. They will either deal specifically with autistic people or advise colleagues who do. They also undertake to train up their colleagues, and the form this training takes will vary according to the roles, priorities and types of services offered by that team. This autism lead role reflects well in practice and makes a demonstrable difference to the way services are delivered.

The training approach works well and is not costly. Training for staff is free. The mentors provide training voluntarily, based on goodwill from them and their organisations. The organisations putting forward mentors see the process as in line with their ethos and aims, and as a development opportunity for the mentor. Staff see the training as part of their professional development, which supports them to deliver the outcomes for individuals that they want to achieve at work. The network has been running since 2005 and this arrangement has proved sustainable.

The training takes between six and 12 months, with a final event after 18 months, which brings mentors and champions together and invites external speakers, including academics, autistic people, carers and someone from the Autism Partnership Board. It is also an opportunity for new mentors to meet new champions and arrange for the next six months of training.

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Information and resources

We know that meeting training requirements can present a challenge about where to go for help and advice. We hope this guide is a useful first step.

In addition to this guide, there is a lot of information to draw on when planning and commissioning autism training for social care assessors, and resources for the assessors themselves to use in practice.

The local authorities we spoke to said that it would be useful to collect this together. The National Autistic Society has set up a web page with information, including training videos, crib sheets, guides and tips for reasonable adjustments. Go to www.autism.org.uk/about/strategy/resources.

If you have more resources that you think should be added to this page, please send them to policy@nas.org.uk.

We also have an online group for health and social care workers to discuss ideas and challenges they have faced. Please join the conversation at network.autism.org.uk/group/health-and-social-care-commissioners.



About The National Autistic Society

We are the UK's leading autism charity. Since we began over 50 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services.

Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, their families and friends. And we support professionals, politicians and the public to understand autism better so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.

Until everyone understands.

www.autism.org.uk