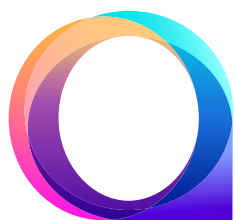


The National Autistic Society's

General Election Campaign Toolkit

#ChangeTheConversation



National
Autistic
Society



How to use this toolkit

Change the
Conversation

In the run-up to the General Election, we want to make sure that **every political candidate hears directly from autistic people**. Urgent change is needed in many areas including education, mental health care and social care.

We know that it can be challenging to share your voice as an autistic person. This toolkit has been designed to support you to **campaign in a way that works for you, however you want to use your voice**. It is time to **Change the Conversation** about autism. We want to change how people talk about autism, help increase understanding and find new ways for autistic people to be politically involved. Given that for many autistic people conversations and communication can be difficult, politicians need to be open to, and informed about, different ways of interacting with constituents.

It is also time to **Change the Conversation** about the lack of services available for autistic people across health, education, mental health, employment and other public services, and it's time to start ensuring all autistic people can get the support they need to thrive.

We've included lots of different ways to get involved, from writing to candidates, speaking to political campaigners on your doorstep, to campaigning creatively and sharing your stories on social media. Plus, tips and stories from autistic campaigners who are determined to **Change the Conversation**.



National Autistic Society's Manifesto - our asks for the General Election



Every autistic person deserves to feel understood, respected and to have access to the support they need. That's why we are calling on the next Government to:

Reform the education system so all autistic children have a suitable school place

Just 26% of autistic children¹ feel happy at school. In 2021 data showed autistic students were more than twice as likely to get excluded as non-SEND peers² and seven in ten autistic students say their teachers don't understand them.³ There must be mandatory training for all school staff on autism and delays in Education Health and Care Plans must be urgently addressed.

End the autism diagnosis crisis

157,809 patients have an open referral for suspected autism. 85% of those people have been waiting longer than the NICE recommended 13 weeks.⁴ All parties should set a target date by which no one is waiting longer than 13 weeks and ensure that everyone has suitable pre- and post-diagnostic support.

End the scandal of autistic people being stuck in mental health hospitals

There are 2,035 autistic people⁵ and people with learning disabilities in inpatient mental health hospitals in England. The Mental Health Act 1983 must be amended as soon as possible, so that autistic people can no longer be detained just because they are autistic. There must also be significant, long-term funding for community mental health and social care services.

Halve the autism employment gap by getting 55% of autistic adults into work by 2030

Autistic people face the worst employment gap out of all disabled people; official data shows just 29%⁶ are in work. Each political party must commit to halving the gap and improving reporting of employment data.

Introduce mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030

The next Government must make sure Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training is fully rolled out to all health and social care staff. As well as this, mandatory autism training should be co-produced with autistic people and rolled out to criminal justice services, all public transportation staff and all benefits staff.

Express yourself

Change the
Conversation

Whether it's through recording videos, writing stories, speaking, using picture-based systems, technological devices or emailing there are lots of ways for you to Change the Conversation.

If you need support to explain your communication needs while campaigning, let us know at campaign@nas.org.uk

Getting in touch with candidates

Sharing information with political party candidates in your constituency can be an effective way to raise their awareness of the common issues faced by autistic people and the policy changes we urgently need.

You can find out which candidates are standing for election in your area here www.whocanivotefor.co.uk or by searching for candidates in your constituency on wikipedia. These sites will be continuously updated, and when the General Election is officially called, about six weeks before election day, they will be updated to include all the official candidates.

Tips when communicating with candidates

1. Include personal stories if you have them and are happy to share. Candidates are interested in the real experiences of their potential constituents. It is their role to represent you, and sharing the ways that Government policy directly impacts you can make a big impact.
2. Share your communication needs. If you need to share your voice in a specific way that works for you, let the candidate know so that they can facilitate this. This can be a great way to improve understanding and highlight the need to make engaging with politicians more accessible. For example if you would like to meet online, rather than in person, or if you'd like use a chat function rather than having a meeting, do ask.
3. Carry on communicating. It may take a while to receive a response from a candidate but don't be afraid to reply again and keep the conversation going. You could suggest a meeting to talk in more detail if this is something you feel comfortable with. If not, you could take the opportunity to explain why meetings are challenging for you and any ways they could be made easier.
4. If writing to a candidate, be specific and concise. Candidates are often very busy and receive correspondence about all sorts of issues. We've included a link to a template below for letters and emails to help you to share your message effectively.



**Click here to use
our template**

Posting on social media

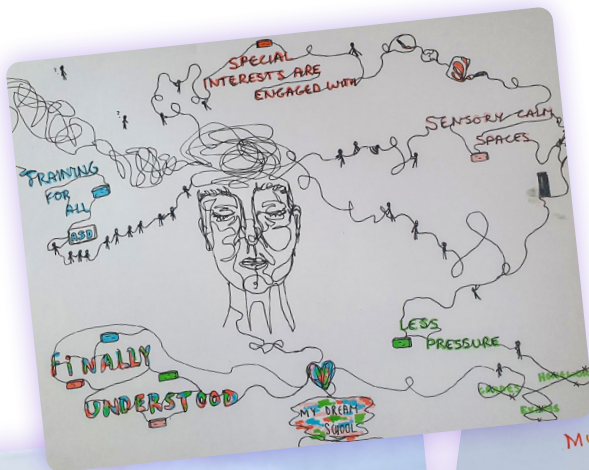
Change the Conversation

For many, social media can be a great place to share information, gain support and make an impact. This can also be a more accessible way of campaigning for some due to the options to share pictures, videos and short posts. For others social media isn't a comfortable, effective or fun place to be. So only share on social media if you know that's something you are comfortable and happy to do.

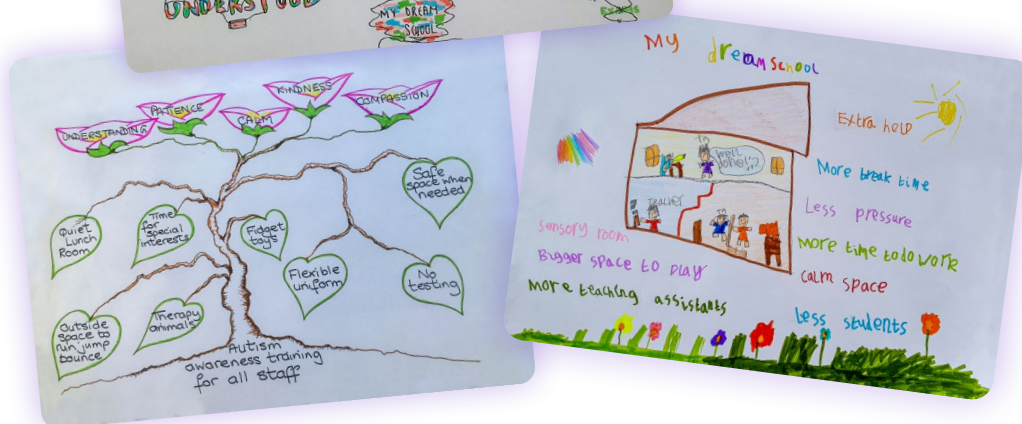
In the run up to the General Election, you can help to campaign by talking about the need for changes within education, employment, mental health care, health and social care and training to better support autistic people.

Tips:

1. Use the hashtag **#ChangeTheConversation**
2. Encourage conversations and responses. For example, you could end your post with a question.
3. If you feel comfortable, make it personal to you. Include examples from your own experiences and express yourself in a way that suits you, whether that's through art, video, words or something totally different.



Example: The National Autistic Society showcased drawings from their Autism Friendly Schools Competition, at our parliamentary event that was attended by over 50 politicians.



Posting on social media

Change the
Conversation

Here are some examples of social media posts for inspiration:

- Before the next General Election, we must **#ChangeTheConversation** about autism. For too long I've been let down by failures in our education/ employment/ mental health/ social care system. What do you wish every politician understood about autism?
- Before the next General Election, I want every politician to understand that timely access to autism diagnosis can stop me and thousands of others from reaching crisis point. What do you want every politician to know? **#ChangeTheConversation**.
- Only 29% of autistic people are in paid work. I'm campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** because every political party must hear directly from autistic people about the barriers to employment we face.
- I'm campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** because my voice deserves to be heard. I'm asking every political party to commit to mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030. Will you join me?
- We must **#ChangeTheConversation** about autism so our voices can be heard. Before the next General Election, I want every politician to understand that nobody should be detained in mental health hospitals just for being autistic.
- Talking to politicians can be especially exhausting if you are autistic. All politicians need to be open minded about how constituents can share their experiences so autistic people can **#ChangeTheConversation**. If you could communicate with your MP on your terms, how would it go?



Questions to ask on the doorstep

Change the Conversation

In the run up to a General Election you may be visited by campaigners from any of the political parties. This can be a good opportunity to ask about their party's positions on key areas for autistic people. If lots of people are interested in talking to party activists about autism, this can show candidates how important this is to constituents.

We know that face-to-face unexpected communication is not the preference for many autistic people. You might prefer to print out the questions below and pass them to party activists and ask them to write information down for you.

Tip: If comfortable, share the impact that Government policy has on your life and explain what you would like the future Government to change.

Questions

Education

- If elected how will your party reform the education system so that all autistic children have a suitable school place and are able to get a timely Education Health and Care (EHC) plan if needed?
- If elected will your party commit to mandatory all school staff training on autism?

Diagnosis

- 85% of people waiting for an autism diagnostic assessment have been waiting longer than the NICE recommended 13 weeks. If elected what will your party do to bring down autism diagnosis waiting times?
- Will your party commit to a target date for reducing waiting times for autism assessment?
- Does your party plan to improve the availability of pre and post diagnostic support for autistic people?



Questions to ask on the doorstep

Change the Conversation

Mental Health

- If elected how will your party end the scandal of autistic people being stuck in mental health hospitals?
- Is your party committed to improving community mental health and social care services so that autistic people don't reach crisis point and get admitted to hospital?

Employment

- If elected would your party set a target to halve the autism employment gap by getting 55% of autistic adults into work by 2030?
- If elected how would your party tackle the unemployment gap for autistic people with only 29% of autistic people in work?

Mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030

- Is your party committed to making sure that all public services staff are trained to understand autism?
- If elected, how will your party make sure that Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training is fully rolled out to health and social care staff?

Tell candidates about our Understanding Autism sessions

The National Autistic Society offers Understanding Autism sessions to all political candidates. Let your candidate know that they can sign up by emailing campaign@nas.org.uk



Messages to send to friends, family and colleagues



Change the Conversation

The more people that campaign to **#ChangeTheConversation**, the bigger our impact. We want everybody to understand how important it is to do the right thing for autistic people. Sometimes the best place to start is with your own friends and family.

Our Young Ambassador Lydia shares how they spread autism awareness and acceptance in their workplace:

“At this stage I feel super confident talking with those in my own life because it's a conversation I've had so many times. I've had to educate people about autism inclusion and autistic experiences since I realised I was autistic at 16. Now I also deliver neurodiversity training at work.

The most useful thing for me when I'm speaking to others about autism is bringing my own curiosity - understanding why people believe the things they do so that I can prompt them from where they are. I like doing this with smaller-groups and individuals as it gives me the chance to be personal and focused”

Tip: Make sure to share this toolkit with friends and family so they can start campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** too.

Tips for sharing your own stories and experiences

Change the Conversation

Sometimes sharing your own personal story can be the most impactful way to show the real life impact of Government policy. When campaigning to improve the lives of autistic people, it's important to make sure that autistic people's voices are the loudest.

Our Young Ambassador Finty has shared some tips and advice below about sharing personal information.

“Make a list about what parts you want to share and what you don't want to share. Ask someone close to you what they think and make a plan of what to do if you get triggered. Start small and just talk to people close to you first. When I'm sharing a personal story, I make sure I'd be happy sharing that information with a random person in the street.”



Endnotes



Change the
Conversation

- ¹ National Autistic Society (2021). School report. Available at:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021>
- ² Department for Education (2022). Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2020-21>
- ³ National Autistic Society (2021). School report. Available at:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/school-report-2021>
- ⁴ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/autism-statistics/october-2022-to-september-2023>
- ⁵ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/learning-disability-services-statistics/at-january-2024-mhsds-december-2023>
- ⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2023/employment-of-disabled-people-2023>



The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427) and also a company limited by guarantee (No.1205298) registered in England. Its registered office is Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London, EC2A 3NH.