



Autism Friendly Award Workbook

Name of service

Autism Friendly Award Lead



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About the Autism Friendly Award

What is the Autism Friendly Award?

Even though more than one in 100 people in the UK are autistic, many autistic people experience considerable challenges when visiting shops, transport hubs, tourist attractions and other facilities and services.

Public spaces can be overwhelming, crowded, unpredictable, loud and bright. And too often, when people feel overloaded by too much information, they encounter a public that simply doesn't understand them and their autism.

Research carried out by the National Autistic Society shows that this can often result in autistic people and their families avoiding going out, leading to them becoming socially isolated.

The Autism Friendly Award celebrates those venues which commit to making sure that autistic visitors receive the same warm welcome as everybody else.

This doesn't mean investing in expensive alterations or training your staff to be autism experts. Small changes can make a massive difference to autistic visitors and just a little understanding can go a long way.

The Autism Friendly Award is evidence-informed. This means that it is based on a combination of what we can learn from relevant studies, together with what has been shown to work in the real world and (most important of all) what autistic people tell us works.

Each venue that achieves the Autism Friendly Award will be opening their doors to the 2.8 million autistic people in the UK, friends and family, helping to make the UK a more autism-friendly place.

Employing autistic people

While this award focuses on the autistic visitor experience we know that many of you will want to know how you can become autistic friendly employers. You can read the guidance the National Autistic Society has produced on this topic [here](#).



About the Autism Friendly Award

About this workbook

This workbook is intended to help you prepare for achieving the Autism Friendly Award. It is divided into three topics:

- Accessible customer Service
- Accessible information
- Accessible environment

Each topic is broken down into goals for you to work towards and tasks to help you identify actions you are already taking or what more you could do. You will find lots of examples from what other services have done. You may find these examples inspiring but maybe a bit daunting, especially if you are a small service with a limited budget.

It is important to appreciate that we don't expect you to do everything and not everything will be relevant to you. When it comes to the assessment, we will take into account what is practical and reasonable for you to have achieved. The main thing we want to see is a commitment to making your service welcoming for autistic people and that you are moving in the right direction in achieving this. As you look at some of the ideas in this workbook, you might also think they could be helpful to many more of your visitors and not just those who are autistic. Indeed, often good customer service for autistic people is just good customer service.

At the end of the workbook, you will find a self-assessment form. You can rate how well you are doing. Once you feel that you can show how you are meeting five or more of the goals according to what is reasonable and practical for your service, you should submit this workbook to your assessor and they can confirm if you have achieved the award.

Terminology used in the workbook

The terms used in this workbook are consistent with the guidelines provided by the National Autistic Society on how to talk and write about autism. This guidance is based on research on the preferences of autistic people, their families and professionals, as well as the feedback and insight the National Autistic Society gets from our supporters and wider work.

[How to talk and write about autism](#)



Autism Friendly Award: Overview



Topic one: Accessible services

Goals

- Our staff understand the key difficulties that autistic people may experience when they visit us.
- Our staff are aware of what reasonable adjustments they can offer to autistic people.
- Our staff know simple approaches they can use that might help in communicating with an autistic person and could make them feel less stressed.
- We actively seek and use feedback from autistic people on what more we can do to make our services accessible to them.

Topic two: Accessible information

Goals

- We provide clear information to autistic people to help them prepare for a visit. This might be in a range of different formats such as accessibility guides, visual guides, virtual tours or sensory maps.
- We make sure our website is accessible and contains accessibility information for autistic people which is easy to find.

Topic three: Accessible environment

Goals

- We provide clear signs and visual supports to help autistic visitors find their way around.
- We have taken reasonable steps to reduce sensory information so our physical environment is accessible.
- We make special arrangements for autistic visitors to help them enjoy our facilities; eg offering alternative routes, quiet spaces; sensory rooms; special events and activities.

Topic one: Accessible services



- **Our staff understand the key difficulties that autistic people may experience when they visit us.**
- **Our staff are aware of what reasonable adjustments they can offer to autistic people.**
- **Our staff know simple approaches they can use that might help in communicating with an autistic person and could make them feel less stressed.**
- **We actively seek and use feedback from autistic people on what more we can do to make our services accessible to them.**

Why is this topic important?

Autism is a lifelong condition related to differences in how the brain works. Around one in 100 people are autistic.

Autistic people experience the world in a different way to the majority of people. Whilst there are some common features of autism, these features may present in many ways as each person is affected by autism differently. Although being autistic can be related to having certain skills and strengths, autism is classified as a disability because of the challenges and discrimination autistic people face in their daily lives.

Research shows that while more people have heard of autism than ever before, only 16% of autistic people and their families think the public understand autism in a meaningful way. This lack of understanding has a daily impact on autistic people's lives.

The National Autistic Society's "Too Much Information" campaign highlighted the five things autistic people say they would like other people to know about what it is like to be autistic:

- *needing extra time to process information*
- *experiencing anxiety in social situations*
- *experiencing anxiety with unexpected changes*
- *finding noise, smells and bright lights painful and distressing*
- *becoming overwhelmed by sensory overload and the demands placed on them.*

Although each autistic person will react to situations differently, many autistic people tell us that they can feel extreme stress when visiting a venue or taking part in an activity, especially for the first time. They may mask their anxiety, or it may present as unwillingness to co-operate or communicate or be misinterpreted as rudeness. It can make a huge difference to them if staff appreciate the difficulties they are experiencing and know some simple things they can do to help.

The best people to ask about how you can make your service autism friendly are autistic people themselves! It is important that you have a way of collecting feedback from autistic visitors and that you act upon it.

Whilst promoting good customer care and helping to create a positive customer experience, engaging with feedback will give you an excellent idea of what you are doing well and what could be improved. Every autistic person is different and the best way to ensure you can accommodate different needs is to take a flexible approach and a culture of acceptance of difference.

Topic one: Accessible services



Task one

Carry out a staff survey to find out how much they know about autism.

Key questions to include:

- **How confident are you in understanding the key difficulties that autistic people may experience when they visit us?**
- **How confident are you in knowing what reasonable adjustments you can offer to autistic people that could be helpful to them?**
- **How confident are you in knowing what simple changes you can make in how you communicate with an autistic person that can be helpful?**

You should include anyone who may deal with members of the public, including front of house staff, volunteers and security.

This audit will help you establish a baseline before you carry out a training activity or if you have offered training in the past, how much of it has been retained. It will also identify any gaps in knowledge to focus on.

Autism awareness training can start with sharing some general facts. But it is very important that staff can relate what they learn to the challenges autistic people may specifically experience when accessing their service. Even more so, training needs to be empowering for staff, helping them to see what steps they can personally take in their own job role to make things easier for autistic customers. Appropriate descriptions and examples relevant to the work they do should be provided and they should understand how the training is relevant to their role and what would be expected of them in each circumstance. It may be most effective to integrate autism awareness training into equality and diversity training or disability discrimination training rather than seeing it as a standalone topic.

You can contact the [National Autistic Society](#) or your [local National Autistic Society branch](#) to find out what training they can offer or another local charity or organisation might be able to help.

In some large organisations, you may want to identify staff who might require additional more specialist training. This could be autism champions or members of an Accessibility Team.

Examples

Find out how the National Autistic Society trained Northern Rail staff to deliver the best possible experience and support for autistic customers.

Find out how the National Autistic Society trained staff at the Valley Shopping Centre to help make visiting as stress-free as possible for autistic people and their families.

Find out about training offered to museums in Scotland to make them more accessible and fun for autistic visitors.

Read about how leisure centres in Scotland have taken part in autism awareness sessions, created designated quiet areas and held regular quiet sessions as well as creating an online film to help autistic customers prepare for their visit.

Topic one: Accessible services



Task two

It is also important to see autism awareness training as not just a one-off activity. Staff need to have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learnt in practice and to refresh their knowledge and understanding.

Think about how autism awareness therefore needs to be revisited and reinforced through ongoing access to a range of professional development activities. Consider whether any of these ideas would work for your service:

- Provide information and ideas about autism on a dedicated section of the staff intranet or on a staff noticeboard.
- Ask an autistic person to talk at a staff meeting. Your local National Autistic Society branch or another local charity or organisation may be able to help you with this. There may be members of your staff who are autistic or have autistic relatives who are happy to share their experiences.
- Think about appointing autism champions who can disseminate training to staff and volunteers.
- Discuss feedback from autistic visitors with your staff team.
- Get in touch with local autism charities, special schools and groups. Search for your 'Local Offer' on your local authority website. They can give you advice about what works for them. Don't assume you have all the answers.

Communication

When communicating with an autistic person who appears to be having difficulties in understanding, it might help to:

- slow down and avoid talking too much
- use clear language
- stick to the point
- ask them if they want you to write it down - some autistic people find it easier to process information when it is written down rather than spoken.

If an autistic person appears stressed, the following might help:

- Listen to them carefully and calmly. Focus on what the person wants them to do.
- Don't tell the person to calm down.
- Don't give out false reassurances which later turn out not to be true.

Topic two: Accessible information



- We provide clear information to autistic people that is helpful for them in preparing a visit. This might be in a range of different formats such as accessibility guides, visual guides, virtual tours or sensory maps.
- We make sure our website is accessible and contains accessibility information for autistic people which is easy to find.

Why is this topic important?

Autistic people tell us that they are less likely to feel anxious when visiting a place or taking part in an activity if they are well-prepared and know what to expect. Having access to advance information can be very important for autistic visitors who may be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes before their visit. By providing as much information as possible about your venue, you will manage expectations, reduce anxiety and assist with planning.

For many autistic people, your website is often the place they will go to get information. You will want to make your website easy for autistic people to use and find out what they need to know.

Task Three

Have a look at some of the examples below of how services present information to autistic people. You will see there are different ways but there is of course no one format that will suit all autistic people and it might also depend on resources available to you and the facilities and services you offer.

Accessibility guides and visual stories

An accessibility Guide provides detailed information about what visitors can expect on their visit. The guide is often written in a 'Plain English' or accessible style.

Do you have an accessibility guide that is available for autistic people before they visit? If you do or if you are thinking of creating one you may want to use our [accessibility guide checklist](#).

In addition to your accessibility guide, consider creating a visual story. A visual story is a short description using little or no words and relies mostly on photographs, pictures and symbols. A visual story may be more useful for younger children or adults who prefer not to have to process too much written information.

You can see an example of an accessibility guide and a visual story produced by Mercury Shopping Centre. You can see other examples below.

How do they work?

Want to know more?

You can use our accessibility guide checklist. You can also read:

[Mencap's guide for accessible writing. Am I making myself clear?](#)

[Accessible Information Standard](#)- these are the standards that all public organisations in the health and social care sectors are legally required to follow but may be of interest for other sectors.

VisitEngland and VisitScotland provide a free to use website for the easy production and publication of accessibility guides.

[Touch Autism](#) offer a free resource that can be used to make visual stories.

Topic two: Accessible information



Examples of accessibility guides and visual Stories

The Galleria Shopping Centre

The Roman Baths, Bath

Edinburgh Airport

Colchester Museum

Colchester Museum Visual story

Y Ganolfan Eifftaidd / Egypt Centre

Bartley Hall

Accessibility – Thornbridge Hall

Mylor Sailing and Powerboat School

British Airways

The Theatre Royal Nottingham

Millom Library

Accessibility guide checklist

Accessibility guide ✓

Is information presented in a logical sequence, one step at a time? Perhaps each step could be numbered to make it easy to follow.

Is there specific information about what an autistic visitor can expect from an activity, situations or event and what is expected of them?

Is everyday language used and too much jargon or abbreviations avoided?

Are sentences kept short?

Have the same words and phrases been used consistently to describe people or things? For example, are people referred to as visitors throughout the document or sometimes as guests and sometimes as visitors?

Is information presented in a literal, concrete way and figurative language (puns, metaphors etc.) avoided?

Layout and design

Is the print large enough, for example, at least 12 point?

Is a clear font used such as Arial or Verdana?

Is there a good contrast between the colour of the text and the colour of the paper?

Is text broken down into small chunks?

Are bullet points or numbered lists used to make key points clear or show a clear sequence?

Using pictures, symbols and photographs

Do images help to explain the text and are not just there to make the document look nice?

Is it clear which part of the text the image relates to?

Are images clear and do not contain too much background detail?

Wherever possible, do photos show the actual place an autistic person may be visiting eg the actual reception area rather than a stock photo of a reception area?



Topic two: Accessible information

Virtual tours and walk-through films

If you have the resources available, you may wish to consider creating a visual tour or a walk-through film. These can give autistic people a real sense of what to expect on their visit.

How do they work?

A virtual tour is a form of immersive technology that allows you to experience a location remotely.

A walk-through film provides a filmed tour of the venue from the point of view of a visitor.

Want to know more?

How to create a virtual tour.

Examples

**Railway stations
in Lancashire**

**Charter Walk
Shopping
Centre**

**BBC
MediaCityUK**

**National
Parliaments**

Birmingham Airport

**Garicoch
Sports
Centre**



Topic two: Accessible information

Sensory maps and Sensory stories/guides

As discussed in the next topic, autistic people can often have extreme sensory sensitivities that can make it challenging for them when visiting public spaces.

A sensory map is a floorplan of your venue that highlights busy and quiet areas and other sensory stimulus that visitors might encounter.

A sensory story or sensory guide is similar to a visual story but focuses more on describing sensory experiences. It may be particularly relevant if a visit to your service and facilities involves a number of unusual or novel sensory experiences such as a farm or a hands-on museum.

You may want to look at the detailed sensory guide that Eureka, the National Children's Museum in Halifax, has created to help autistic visitors to find out the sounds, smells, sights and things to touch in each area of the museum.

How do they work?

Want to know more?

Read this description of how a sensory map was created.

Examples

Reading Museum sensory mat

Sensory story by Beechenhill Farm

Network Rail's guide for autistic visitors



Topic two: Accessible information

Task four

Look at this dedicated webpage for visits to the Houses of Parliament. How useful do you think this information would be? Does your organisation have a similar webpage?

Use this checklist to help you evaluate your own website and app. It takes into account recommendations from the study, as well as international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

	✓
Is content structured logically using headings and lists?	
Can users move through content in a way that makes sense?	
Is content well-structured and written in plain English?	
Is basic information provided that would be helpful to autistic people such as how to get to the venue or opening and closing times?	
Is there a webpage specifically aimed at autistic people that contains useful information and access to resources? Is it easy to find this page; for example, by doing a search?	
Do images help to understand written content?	
Do images have alternative text?	
Does the website include consistent navigation?	
Does the content scale well when text is enlarged?	
Does the web page or document have a title that describes its topic or purpose?	
Does the interface have sufficient contrast between text colour and background colour?	
Has content that flashes or flickers been avoided?	
Do online forms provide helpful, accessible error and verification messages?	

Want to know more?
Find out more about the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

Topic three: Accessible environment



- We provide clear signs and visual supports to help autistic visitors find their way around.
- We have taken reasonable steps to reduce sensory information so our physical environment is accessible.
- We make special arrangements for autistic visitors to help them enjoy our facilities eg offering alternative routes, quiet spaces, sensory rooms, special events and activities.

Why is this topic important?

Autistic people may find their first visit to a public space stressful. Much of this stress may relate to uncertainty about where to go and where toilets and other facilities might be when needed.

Autistic people may not be confident asking a person for help as they can find social interactions difficult. They will be even less likely to ask for help if it is not clear who they should ask.

Autistic people can experience difficulties in processing what is said to them, so even if they do speak to someone, they may not understand or retain what they have been told; for example, if they are given spoken directions.

Autistic people generally tend to be better at processing visual information. So signs and other visual information, such as floor trails and wall floor maps, can be helpful to them, providing they are clear and consistent. If not, they may just add to an autistic person's confusion and anxiety.

Another considerable challenge for autistic people is that they often experience sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours or temperatures. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people might ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting.

Coping with a range of sensory input within a public place can be overwhelming and cause anxiety, exhaustion, pain, a need to escape the situation or difficulty communicating. When the brain has to put all of its resources into sensory processing, it can shut off other functions, like speech, decision making and information processing.

You can find out more about the sensory challenges that autistic people can experience [here](#).

Task five

Ask someone who has never been to your service and give them some tasks to complete, like finding out where they go to buy a ticket or how they find their seat. Ideally this should be an autistic person., However, the most important thing is that they have not visited before and can't just rely on familiarity.

Questions to consider:

- Were signs easy to see?
- Were signs clear and consistent in presentation?
- Did signs appear at regular and predictable intervals?
- Did signs use symbols or pictures or just words?
- Were signs colour-coded? For example all signs for the same destination in the same colour?
- What other visual information is available e.g., notices; floor plans; colour-coded floor trails?
- Was it obvious who the person could ask; for example, a person with a 'Here to help' lanyard?

How easy did they find it to use visual information to get around your venue? Is there anything you could do to make improvements?

Topic three: Accessible environment



Task six

Identify the places accessed by the public at your venue that are particularly busy, noisy, cluttered or where there is a lot of activity. Is there any sensory stimuli that stands out?

To assess the level of sensory impact that autistic visitors to your venue might experience, it's a good idea to invite them to help you. You could contact your local National Autistic Society branch or a local group or service for or run by autistic people.

As experts in how the condition affects them, an autistic person will give you valuable insight and specific feedback about your venue and the kinds of adjustments you can make to ease sensory stress.

A key question you should ask is whether your environment has a calming effect. For example, is use made of relaxing colours (such as neutral green, beige or blues), of plants that reduce stress or soothing sounds?

Are areas that people move around spacious? Are different sectors or zones clearly marked out; For example, through a colour-coding scheme? Is visual clutter hidden; for example, by screening off areas?

If you identify any unpleasant or distracting sensory stimuli can this be reduced or removed; for example, through improved acoustics or using odour-free cleaning materials or sound-absorbent materials?

Find out how East Midlands railway carried out autism friendly environment audits on their railway stations involving autistic individuals.

Task seven

With the best will in the world, you won't be able to eliminate all sensory stimuli that could have a negative impact on an autistic person. However, there is a lot services can do to make their environment and activities more accessible to autistic people. Read about some of these examples.

Could any of these be relevant to and offered at your service?

How does this work?

Alternative routes

Entrances to buildings or to different parts of a building can often be very busy and involve queuing in narrow spaces. If you have identified that this is an issue, could autistic people be offered an alternative route or arrangement that avoids the crowds or is calmer and quieter?

Find out how Buckingham Palace offers an alternative quieter calmer entrance for autistic visitors.

Topic three: Accessible environment



How does this work?

Quiet spaces, chill out rooms and sensory rooms

These areas provide a safe space for an autistic person to escape to when they need to get away from too much sensory information or they just feel exhausted from the demands being placed on them and need to 'recharge their batteries'.

Do you have any spaces in your venue which you could designate as quiet rooms?

Some spaces are maintained as low arousal calm spaces with plain walls, soft furnishings and lighting that can be dimmed. Some provide sensory equipment such as bubble tubes which may help an autistic person regulate sensory input.

[Find out about the sensory room at Queen Park Rangers Football Ground.](#)

[Find out about the chill out room at the Waterfront Museum.](#)

[Find out about the calm room at Crewe Station.](#)

How does this work?

Sensory items to help autistic people regulate sensory input

You could invest in making sensory items available to autistic people which help them regulate sensory input; for example, headphones or ear defenders; sunglasses or 'fidget' items.

[Find out about how Plymouth Argyle Football Club offers autistic fans sensory packs.](#)

[Find out how the Museum of Cornish Life offers young autistic visitors sensory backpacks.](#)

[Find out about the sensory rooms at Arsenal and Chelsea Football Clubs.](#)

[Find out about the Sensory Toys available at the White Rose Shopping Centre.](#)

How does this work?

Familiarisation visits

A familiarisation visit is the opportunity to visit a venue when it is quiet or closed to the public before the actual visit. This could be in the form of an open day or an opportunity offered to an individual. The aim is for the visitor to begin familiarising themselves with the new surroundings ahead of their main visit.

For example, before their first match, an autistic person could visit a football stadium on a non-match day so they can work out their route and practise sitting in their seat.

[Find out about the Familiarisation visit offered by London City Airport.](#)

Topic three: Accessible environment



How does this work?

Schemes that enable autistic people to let staff know they may need assistance or a little more time

Autism is sometimes referred to as a hidden disability because people can't see that someone is autistic, like, for example, they could tell that someone is using a wheelchair.

So, some autistic people choose to wear the Sunflower lanyard to discreetly identify that they may need support, help or just a little more time in shops, transport or public spaces.

[Find out about the National Autistic Society's I am autistic card.](#)

[Find out about the Sunflower Hidden Disabilities Scheme.](#)

[Find out about the autism awareness wristband recognised at some venues.](#)

How does this work?

A few services offer a regular dedicated quiet time for autistic people and other people with sensory sensitivities. For example, during a supermarket quiet time, lights might be dimmed, there will be no background music, use of the tannoy avoided and check-out beeps turned down.

Theatres, cinemas and other venues may offer a relaxed performance. This is a performance that's been adapted to suit people who might require a more relaxed environment when going to the theatre, including some autistic people.

Some technical changes may have been made to the performance - this can include quieter music, reducing loud or surprising sound effects and avoiding strobe lighting.

There is a relaxed attitude towards audience noise and movement which can be helpful to some autistic people when they are trying to find ways to sensory regulate.

Some venues offer socially distanced performances. These were first introduced during the global pandemic but have continued to be offered for those that prefer to have space between themselves and other people. This can suit some autistic people who can find being in close proximity to other people stressful.

Many autistic people and their families welcome such dedicated events. However, they may not be convenient or suitable for all autistic people. It is important that such events are part of a range of autism-friendly strategies and that autistic people are made to feel welcome at any time of the day a venue is open to the general public.

Examples;

[Lyceum Theatre](#)

[Bouverie Place Shopping Centre offers a Sensory Sunday quiet time where autistic people can access the Shopping centre in a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.](#)

[Supermarket quiet hour](#)

[Autism-friendly performances and screenings Glasgow Film Access Club](#)

Autism-friendly visit times and events

Self-assessment



Self-assessment of topics

Topic one - accessible services

- Our staff understand the key difficulties that autistic people may experience when they visit us.
- Our staff are aware of what reasonable adjustments they can offer to autistic people.
- Our staff know simple approaches they can use that might help in communicating with an autistic person and could make them feel less stressed.
- We actively seek and use feedback from autistic people on **what more** we can do to make our services accessible to them.

Topic two - accessible information

- We provide clear information to autistic people that is helpful for them in preparing for a visit. This might be in a range of different formats such as accessibility guides, visual guides, virtual tours or sensory maps.
- We make sure our website is accessible and contains accessibility information for autistic people which is easy to find.

Topic three - Accessible environment

- We provide clear signs and visual supports to help autistic visitors find their way around.
- We have taken reasonable steps to reduce sensory information to help make our physical environment more accessible.
- We make special arrangements for autistic visitors to help them enjoy our facilities eg offering alternative routes, quiet spaces, sensory rooms, special events and activities.

Met

Partially met

Not met

Self-assessment



Explanation of self-assessment score

What we do well:

Self-assessment



Explanation of self-assessment score

What we could do better:

Self-assessment



Explanation of self-assessment score

What we hope to do next:

Assessment outcome



Assessor feedback

Assessor grade

Assessor feedback

Next steps



About the National Autistic Society

The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by providing support, guidance and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.

We have come a long way but it is not good enough. There is still so much to do to increase opportunities, reduce social isolation and build a brighter future for people on the spectrum. With your help, we can make it happen.



The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England (No.1205298), registered office 393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG.