

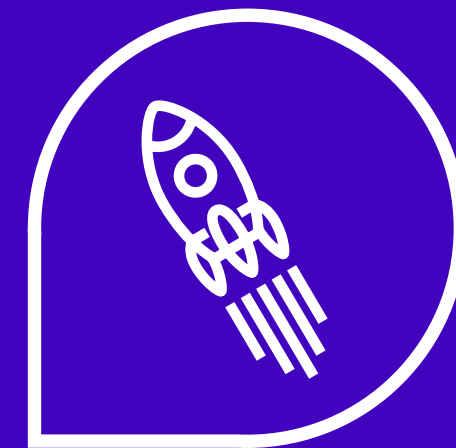
National Autistic Society Northern Ireland

Vision to Reality

Strategy 2023-2026



**Creating
a society
that works
for autistic
people**



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Forewords



As we approach 20 years of working in Northern Ireland, it is a time to reflect. We have come a long way in the development of services and the support we provide to autistic people and their families. Through awareness-raising and understanding and campaigning for change we have made a real difference. But there is still so much to do.

Autism services have long been neglected and underfunded in Northern Ireland, and with Covid and now the cost-of-living crisis there is a massive strain on the services which autistic people and their families need. Waiting times for an autism assessment for children has reached three years in some Trust areas and five years for adults, respite services are still not operating at pre-Covid levels, and unemployment rates for autistic adults are higher than for any other disability.

This strategy is needed now more than ever. It is all about autistic people and their families. We listened to what you told us – both as part of the UK-wide [Moonshot Vision](#) and through our Northern Ireland consultation. Based on your input about your priorities and the kind of society you want to see, the strategy outlines what we want to achieve in the short, medium and long term, and we will work alongside you and collaborate with others to make this vision a reality.

Shirelle Stewart, Director of the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland



Autism. The very word conjures up all sorts of perceptions. An enigma, a strangeness, a closed book. I've been told I'm weird, aloof and not quite right. Most people like to tell me I don't look autistic or dismiss it with, "Well aren't we all a little bit autistic."

Unless you are autistic you can't possibly understand what it is like to live with the condition. Of course, you may have a very good understanding of how it affects a family member – but can you honestly say you are so finely tuned in to everything around you 24/7 that it encroaches on every aspect of your being?

The neurotypical world is extremely difficult and exhausting for autistic people to try and navigate. Do we be our true autistic self or do we need to put on that mask and 'blend in' with what society dictates and expects? For many, the latter is true – we dare not show our autistic identity for fear of upsetting our neurotypical peers. Being part of the National Autistic Society helped me embrace my true autistic identity. I didn't want 'corrected'. I needed to be understood, accepted and empowered. The National Autistic Society encouraged and supported me to do this.

Achieving a society that works for autistic people needs to be autistic led. We are the experts! We know what works – so it is vital that you include us in every thought, consultation, collaboration and influential decision. Experts are consulted in every other walk of life. Autistic people deserve to be afforded that same right; to be consulted, respected and listened to, in order that their valuable input can be used to shape policies, strategies and life chances.

Awareness has certainly increased; however, understanding and acceptance still have a long way to go. Autistic people and their families are all too acutely aware of this.

The [Moonshot Vision](#) is powerful and mighty. In a perfect world, society would not need to adapt. However, reality is not perfect and never will be. Nonetheless, with the inclusion of valuable autistic insight, autism will be accepted and – more importantly – wholly embraced and understood.

As a collective autistic voice, we have the power and determination to strive for an inclusive society that works for everyone.

Claire Burke, Autistic volunteer, Co-producer and Co-deliverer of the Skills for Life programme

"Achieving a society that works for autistic people needs to be autistic led. We are the experts!"

Claire Burke,
Autistic volunteer



Who we are and what we do

The National Autistic Society was started in 1962 by a group of desperate parents sitting around a kitchen table. They were trying to get the right education for their autistic children at a time when autism was barely heard of and autistic people were locked away in institutions.

In 2005 we established our first Northern Ireland office, in Botanic Avenue in Belfast, and during the life of this strategy we will celebrate our 20th anniversary. In this time, we have made enormous advancements in the support we provide. Our specialist services, programmes of support and branch network make an enormous difference to the lives of autistic people and their families across Northern Ireland.

In 2019 we established the first autism-specific centre that caters for autistic adults and children in Northern Ireland. At the core of the centre is a day service for autistic adults with complex and high support needs. The centre also offers programmes of support most evenings and weekends to autistic adults, children and their families, ensuring that this state-of-the-art facility is used to its full potential.

Relentless campaigning alongside autistic people and their families has driven vital improvements in healthcare, education, in the workplace and the law. Public awareness and understanding of autism has massively increased, in no small part due to our work.



Today, our goal is the same as it always was - to create a society that works for autistic people. But society has changed a lot since that kitchen table conversation, as has what we know about autism and what autistic people rightly expect from the world around them.

So, in 2022 at a UK level we embarked on a major exercise to articulate what a society that works for autistic people actually looks like, by asking autistic people and their families about the challenges they face and the changes they most want to see. This led to the publication of our shared vision of an autism-friendly society. We called it **'The Moonshot'** because of the scale of ambition and collaboration needed to achieve it.

Autistic people and family members told us powerful stories about the barriers and discrimination they face every day in all areas of life. They told us that a society that works for autistic people:

- Values autistic individuals
- Maximises autistic power
- Guarantees support
- Adapts public services and spaces
- Is free from discrimination.



We are here to transform lives and change attitudes to help create a society that works for autistic people.



Our core beliefs

We believe the role of the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland is to:

1. Support all autistic individuals and their families to live a fulfilled life on their terms.

2. Influence and collaborate with others to improve standards and adjustments.

3. Transform society by building understanding, acceptance and respect for all autistic people.

For each belief, we defined a set of ambitions to focus our efforts for maximum impact. We set these out in the pages that follow and outline some of the steps we'll take to achieve them.

Each of these ambitions will take time. With some, we can start work straight away. With others, we need to research and plan before we start delivering on them. We will complete some of the ambitions within the three years of this strategy, while others will be started but will still run for many years to come.

In some cases, these mirror the actions within the UK strategy, where the issues and the solutions are the same, while in other cases they differ to reflect what you told us needs to happen in Northern Ireland, via our consultation process. The differences also reflect the unique legislative, social, economic and cultural landscape of Northern Ireland.

If we can go further and do more to work towards our beliefs, we will.

Realising our ambitions

Directly supporting autistic people

When we opened our Autism Centre in Carryduff in 2019, our ambition was that this fabulous space would be used on a 24/7 basis, providing vital support to autistic people across the spectrum and their families. We asked autistic people and their families what support they needed, and as a result we developed our day service and our Support for Life Programme.

Day service

Our day service is for autistic adults with complex and high support needs who can't be supported in traditional day services. It offers onsite behaviour support, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, ensuring that the adults we work with can continue to grow and develop their skills. The Autism Centre is specifically kitted out to meet the sensory and support needs of autistic people across the spectrum and their families.

Support for Life programme

Our Support for Life programme provides a wide range of support for autistic children, adults and their families. It is comprised of a number of different projects, including the following:

Our **Skills for Life programme** aims to equip young people aged 13 to 17 with the skills they need for an independent life. Topics include understanding your autism, keeping safe online, relationships, managing money, personal hygiene, promoting good mental health, etc.

At our **Cookery programme**, young people and adults learn the importance of food hygiene and how to cook basic meals, developing the skills they need to live independently.

Our **Youth Club** supports children and young people aged between 7 and 13 with complex and high support needs, who rarely get the opportunity to attend social events. All the young people have dedicated, often one-to-one support so they can fully experience and enjoy a wide range of activities.

Meeting every other Saturday at the Autism Centre, our **Juniors Club** supports young autistic people aged 13-17 with complex and high support needs, who show distressed behaviours.

The **Girls Group** is very much peer led, focusing on the topics that its members are interested in or would like support with. Sessions range from understanding how autism impacts you and coping with challenges at school, to arts and crafts, cookery, etc.

“The Lending Library at the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland centre is so helpful. It allows us to try out items that are expensive to see if they are suitable for our child, without having to spend lots of money and then the item not being useful.”

Parent using the Lending Library



Our **Siblings Group** provides a safe space for the brothers and sisters of autistic young people to meet and take part in activities with others with similar experiences.

Members of our **Autistic Women's Group** very much enjoy going out together in the community. Activities range from having lunch to visiting museums, markets and other attractions. It's a chance to socialise, make friends, share experiences and try new things in a supportive environment.

At our **Autistic Parents Group**, autistic people who are parents have the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation and provide peer support in a safe, non-judgemental space.

Our **Dads Group** enables fathers to meet and socialise with other dads whose children are autistic.

All teenagers face pressures, but the teenage years can be particularly hard if you have autism. Our **Teen Life** programme brings together parents and carers of autistic young people aged 10 to 16 to share information, experiences and ideas, with an emphasis on autistic perspectives.

Our **Parent Training** runs alongside our Skills for Life programme and provides advice and support to parents whose young people are in their teenage years.

Online Social Groups

Our two online Social Groups cover the Northern Trust area and the Belfast Trust area. The groups are peer led and focus on friendship, sharing experiences and providing mutual support.

Branch networks

Our branch network stretches across Northern Ireland and provides invaluable support for families in their local communities. Many provide social activities for children, young people and adults, as well as advice and support to parents.

Lending Library

Our Lending Library enables autistic adults or families to borrow a wide range of equipment and books on autism, free of charge. Some sensory equipment can be very expensive, so providing a 'try before you buy' service is especially important in the current cost-of-living crisis.

Belief 1: Support

Support all autistic individuals and their families to live fulfilled lives on their own terms

We're here to support the more than 35,000 autistic people in Northern Ireland and their families. That won't change - we heard loud and clear from our insight gathering that this should remain one of our top priorities. But we'll work harder to make sure that autistic people are at the heart of shaping and delivering the support they want, whether that's in public or specialist services, the world of work, or their care and family networks. We'll also strive to maximise autistic power through greater representation in all areas of life.

"The best thing about the Youth Club is how much our son loves going there! He feels safe and always has fun. Whilst he can't tell me this with his own words, I can tell this by the big smile on his face when he knows he is going. The time he spends there is also invaluable to his sister and means I can spend time with her one-to-one, which we both benefit so much from."

Parent of Youth Club member

Ambition 1

Autistic people are empowered to shape public narratives and influence their communities

We'll start by:

- Supporting autistic people to hold positions on policymaking forums across Northern Ireland in areas impacting their lives.
- Setting up participation groups to enable autistic people across the spectrum to shape our National Autistic Society Northern Ireland services, policies and campaigns.
- Using social media and our Northern Ireland newsletter to make sure autistic voices are loud and clear and at the forefront of everything we do.
- Using social media and the mainstream media to challenge stereotypes and stigma, and promote understanding and acceptance.

Ambition 2

Autistic people are supported to enjoy varied life experiences through all stages of life

We'll start by:

- Establishing a new state-of-the-art autism centre in Northern Ireland with a new specialist day service to support autistic adults with complex needs.
- Developing a range of services from the new autism centre, which will cater for autistic adults, children and young people across the spectrum and their families.
- Achieving accreditation for our National Autistic Society Northern Ireland services.
- Developing our mentoring programmes for autistic adults.
- Training other organisations in our Skills for Life programme for young people so we can ensure that young people across Northern Ireland have opportunities to develop skills for independence.

Ambition 3

Autistic people can access all types of work, fulfil their goals and feel part of workplace communities

We'll start by:

- Increasing the number of autistic people we employ and becoming an exemplary employer of autistic people in Northern Ireland.
- Sharing our learning on advertising, hiring and managing autistic employees with HR professionals in other organisations and businesses.
- Celebrating autistic role models in the employment and volunteer world on social media and in the mainstream media.
- Developing our autism-friendly award and promoting it to employers in Northern Ireland.

Ambition 4

Families and support networks are equipped to support autistic people, from pre-diagnosis to the end of life

We'll start by:

- Developing the range of training we offer to autistic people and their families and carers.
- Growing and developing our branch network to ensure that no matter where you are in Northern Ireland, you can get support from the National Autistic Society.
- Developing and growing our Support for Life programme.
- Providing up-to-date advice and guidance on carers' rights, and empowering autistic people and families to advocate for themselves.
- Growing our family support offer in Northern Ireland.

Belief 2: Influence

Influence and collaborate with others to improve standards and adjustments

Our vision of an autism-friendly future is a vision for the whole of society. This means we can't achieve it alone. Autistic people and their families told us we need to collaborate more - with local and national government, employers, and other groups and organisations, among others - in order to have the reach and influence we need to change society. Our training, campaigning and advocacy must be targeted, persistent and based on autistic voices.

“Your help with our daughter’s statement has been invaluable, and already seems to be paying off. Her school have found her a classroom assistant she really seems to like, and she went in all five days last week (mostly in the Learning Support Room, admittedly, but it is great progress nonetheless), and all days so far this week.”

Parent of autistic pupil

Ambition 1

Public spaces are welcoming, with adjustments that recognise the diverse needs and preferences of autistic people

We'll start by:

- Opening up our autism centres to visitors to demonstrate good autism design and support practice to influence service provision across Northern Ireland.
- Ensuring that autism forums and boards have autistic people and families as chairs and co-chairs.
- Collaborating with other organisations to ensure that public spaces are welcoming and supportive environments for autistic people.

Ambition 2

Autistic people have positive education experiences, with a curriculum and learning environments that suit them

We'll start by:

- Campaigning to make autism training mandatory for school staff and governors in Northern Ireland.
- Challenging the high number of young people not attending school in Northern Ireland, and shifting the debate to focus on the reasons for this.
- Lobbying the Education and Training Inspectorate to monitor how well schools are meeting the needs of pupils with autism.

Ambition 3

The needs of autistic people are recognised and met in healthcare, social care, housing, mental health and criminal justice

We'll start by:

- Campaigning to ensure that the post of Northern Ireland Autism Reviewer is taken forward and their role as an independent advocate is fully carried out.
- Campaigning to ensure full implementation of the Northern Ireland Autism Strategy.
- Continuing to campaign to ensure that the needs of autistic people with complex and high support needs and their families are met.
- Campaigning to reduce diagnostic waiting times and improve access to post-diagnostic support for both adults and children.

Ambition 4

Autistic people are a core part of the workforce and kind, flexible workplaces are commonplace

We'll start by:

- Supporting the creation of an employer kitemark and promoting it to employers throughout Northern Ireland.
- Providing clear information and advice about employing autistic people in all kinds of roles, with guidance on the barriers that traditional recruitment and workplace practices present.
- Working with autism forums across Northern Ireland to change and influence employment cultures to make them more inclusive for autistic people.

Belief 3: Transform

Transform society by building understanding, acceptance and respect for all autistic people

Autistic people and their family members often tell us that the thing that would make the biggest improvement to their lives is greater public understanding of autism. Lack of understanding has a daily impact on autistic people's lives and is one of the main barriers they face to taking part in education, work or leisure activities. We're committed to deepening public knowledge, sharing best practice, overcoming stereotypes and ending stigma.

"I have three boys; two are autistic, with very different levels of need. Puberty, hormones, sex and relationships were all terrifying hurdles that I did not have a clue how to approach. Thanks to the Teen Life programme I feel much more informed and supported. This has given me a sense of confidence that I can get the boys through these difficult years and give them the information they need."

Parent who received training alongside Teen Life programme

Ambition 1

There is universal understanding of the lived experience and power of autistic individuals

We'll start by:

- Participating in the UK-wide, 'always-on' campaign for autism understanding and acceptance.
- Providing comprehensive and trusted information on autism to the Northern Ireland public.
- Gathering information on what autistic people and their families tell us about their lived experience and using it to direct our work.

Ambition 2

Autistic stereotypes and misinformation are challenged and stigma is ended

We'll start by:

- Working with other organisations to challenge discrimination and the lack of service provision for autistic people and their families via the legal system.
- Using our social media to challenge stereotypes, end stigma and present positive role models.
- Ensuring that we reflect the lived experience of autistic people across the spectrum and their families.

Ambition 3

There is a wide and ongoing commitment to deepening knowledge about autism and sharing best practice

We'll start by:

- Sharing up-to-date information on autism and best practice with professionals, families and other organisations who need it.
- Promoting up-to-date information and best practice to autism forums across Northern Ireland and arranging for its dissemination through these forums.
- Continuing to deepen understanding and knowledge via our social media and external affairs platforms.

Ambition 4

Autistic people and those that advocate for them are brought together in a movement for change

We'll start by:

- Developing and empowering our volunteer branches to build and grow support around our vision in their local communities.
- Collaborating with other organisations at a local and national level.
- Providing advice, guidance and support for autistic people, families, friends and allies to build their own capacity to push for change.

How we'll deliver this strategy

We recognise that to achieve the ambitions laid out above, we also need to change ourselves. Fundamentally, we need to reflect the change that we want to see and to lead by example. This section focuses on our 'foundations' - the culture and ways of working we'll develop as an organisation to help put our strategy into practice.

To support our strategy in Northern Ireland:

- We'll ensure that autistic people and their families are at the centre of the design of our services and projects.
- We'll ensure that we are an exemplary employer of autistic people.
- We'll ensure that all our staff in Northern Ireland can fully understand the role that they play in the delivery of the strategy.
- We'll expand our fundraising base in Northern Ireland to ensure that the support and services we provide are sustainable.
- We'll demonstrate an exemplary approach to safeguarding, governance, risk, and health and safety in delivering high-quality services.



We need to reflect the change that we want to see and to lead by example.



**Thank
you**

**Join the movement to
create a society that
works for autistic people.**

Campaign with us

Lobby your MP, MLA, council and businesses to ensure that autistic people get the support they're entitled to.

Volunteer with us

Find out about current volunteer opportunities with our local branches or how to set up a National Autistic Society Northern Ireland branch.

Raise funds

Donate, run a marathon, organise a quiz - your support enables us to provide vital services in Northern Ireland.

Become a member

Join like-minded people and receive your quarterly *Your Autism* magazine and the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland newsletter.

To find out more, visit
www.autism.org.uk/get-involved

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

We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for autistic adults and children across Northern Ireland, as well as their family members and carers. Since 2005, 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've come a long way, but there is still so much to do to increase opportunities, reduce social isolation and build a brighter future for people on the autism spectrum. The Moonshot Vision sets out what a society that works for autistic people really looks like - as described by autistic people and their families. This organisational strategy puts us on a pathway to achieve this vision for all of society.

Find out more at [**www.autism.org.uk**](http://www.autism.org.uk)

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**National
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