

National Autistic Society Scotland

From Vision to Reality

Strategy 2023-2026



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



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Forewords



I joined the Highland Branch because I wanted something positive to do in a difficult time. I was identified as autistic in my early teens and then there was never much help available, so helping people like me was a big draw. I didn't expect joining to have such a positive impact on me.

I feel more positive, more proactive and I have been able to re-examine my (overwhelmingly negative) view of myself. I think being surrounded by people that understand, accept and even celebrate autism made me finally able to accept myself.

This is just one of many ways in which we can make things better for autistic people and those around them. In my opinion, it is important that discussion and work around autism is led by autistic people.

The National Autistic Society Scotland needs to lead by example and employ more autistic people so that there is representation at all levels of the organisation. I also feel we can do more to actively seek to help and educate people in the community. As long as we keep constantly advancing, improving and listening to the people we serve, I believe we have near-infinite potential to make autistic people's lives better.

Adam McLeod, Highland Branch volunteer



Throughout my career within local government and the housing and care sector in Scotland, I have seen first-hand how critical it is that autistic people and families get the support they need. It's why I'm proud to be a Trustee of the National Autistic Society and proud that we're able to lay out such an ambitious strategy for our work in Scotland.

More than a year ago, at a UK level, we worked with autistic people, families and professionals on a major project which became known as 'Moonshot'. This was our attempt to set out a blueprint vision of what a society that works for autistic people actually looks like.

Our Scotland strategy embraces this vision while giving us the flexibility to operationalise our activities to best meet the needs of autistic people and families in Scotland.

Olga Clayton, Trustee



I have seen first-hand how critical it is that autistic people and families get the support they need.

Olga Clayton, Trustee



For more than 25 years, we have worked hard to deliver programmes of support for autistic people and families in Scotland, as well as campaign for change.

Rob Holland, Director of the National Autistic Society Scotland



Since health and social care services in Scotland were devolved to the Scottish Government over 20 years ago, we have developed a distinct and uniquely Scottish social care offer north of the border. I am in no doubt this is to our advantage.

That said, for the National Autistic Society Scotland to remain relevant, cutting edge and fit for purpose, we need to plan what we do viewed through a Scottish lens. I believe our strategy does just that, capturing as it does the ambitions of key members of our staff, the people who enjoy our support and those closely connected to us.

It is nearly 40 years since I started my career in health and social care, and in that time, I can't remember ever working with such a dedicated, kind and hardworking group of people. It is my real privilege to be a part of our work in Scotland, and a joy to be connected to the fabulous people we support and their families.

Peter Jung, Head of Services - Scotland and Northern Ireland



For more than 25 years, we have worked hard to deliver programmes of support for autistic people and families in Scotland, as well as campaign for change. There is much to be proud of and we have achieved a lot, but the reality is that multiple barriers still exist which prevent autistic people fulfilling their potential - whether that is accessing a diagnosis in the first place to the appropriate level of understanding and support within education, the health system and the workplace.

We have to do more and I'm hugely proud of the three-year strategy - not least with the steps we've taken to include autistic people, families, volunteers, professionals and staff in its development. It is ambitious and ensures that we put the voices of autistic people firmly at the heart of what we're doing, whether that's designing and delivering our support through to our campaigning and influencing work.

We cannot deliver this strategy alone and so to be successful, we will collaborate and partner with others who share our vision and want to see it become a reality.

Rob Holland, Director of the National Autistic Society Scotland

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 understood and autistic people were often locked away in institutions.

Just over 25 years ago, we began working in Scotland and have fought hard for autistic people's rights and autism-friendly policies ever since. Our specialist services, programmes of support and local branches are life-changing for those across Scotland who use them.

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



Our vision

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.

Both the UK and Scotland organisational strategies put us on a pathway to make this vision a reality.

Our mission

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 Scotland 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. Similarly, some ambitions we will complete within the three years of this strategy, while others will be started in the three years but 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. In other cases, they differ to reflect the different legislative, social, economic and cultural landscape of Scotland.

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



Building on our successes

Directly supporting autistic people

Through our **Post Diagnostic Support Programme**, in the last two years, we have supported more than 300 children and young people who have recently been diagnosed to understand and embrace their identity as an autistic person.

Through our **Social Navigation Programme**, we piloted structured support for more than 150 young adults, empowering them to develop social navigation strategies and confidence.

In 2022, we launched the **'Mentoring for Autistic Adults Programme'** which will provide tailored, person-centred support to help individuals work towards personal goals.

Our **Social Groups** are attended by more than 160 young people and adults each week, providing a safe space for attendees to connect, build friendships and confidence to thrive.

We have secured a further three years of funding from CashBack for Communities for our **Moving Forward+ Programme**, which provides personalised support to young autistic people in some of Scotland's most deprived communities to work towards positive destinations.

The programme has also been expanded to work directly with young people **not engaging with school** and now covers those aged 10-25.

"This programme has given me the confidence to start a volunteering role and helped me by giving me strategies to use in social situations."

Social Navigation participant

Over the last academic year, our **Student Support Service** provided specialist mentoring, one-to-one study skills and study assistance support for 120 autistic students at universities and colleges across Scotland, helping them to fulfil their academic potential.

We support more than 70 autistic adults across our **outreach and supported living services** to develop independent living skills, access the community, take part in social activities, build friendships and relationships as well as gain additional skills through volunteering and other activities.

Support in communities

This year, we launched our Glasgow Branch, which joins our **network of 15 branches** across Scotland. Our hardworking volunteers run support, information and social activities for autistic adults, children and their families in their local area. They also fundraise and campaign on local issues.



Information, advice and guidance

Through our Scotland-wide quarterly newsletter, *News and Views*, website and social media channels, we reach thousands of people seeking **information on autism, diagnosis, support** and much more.

Last year, our **Highland Information Service** reached more than 500 families and professionals through one-to-one guidance, as well as 11 information sessions.

Through **Autism Support Ayrshire**, last year we responded to more than 400 individual enquiries from autistic people, families and professionals while supporting nine volunteers and collaborating with over 60 local partners.

Over the last year, our **Education Rights Helpline** provided information and advice to 332 families while our **Transition Support Helpline** provided information and advice to 117 families.

Our **Education Tribunal Support Helpline** supported ten families through issues such as placing requests and refusals. 66% of the appeals were successful, either following a successful appeal or prior to the hearing.

Creating change

Thanks to our campaigning, the SNP has promised to create a Commissioner to promote and protect the rights of autistic people. Acting on this promise, the Scottish Government is due to bring forward proposals for a Commissioner as part of the *Learning Disability, Autism and Neurodiversity Bill*.

Our successful campaign, *Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved*, resulted in a commitment to introduce autism awareness as part of teacher training for all new teachers.

We continue to provide the secretariat with partners for the **Cross-Party Group on Autism** at the Scottish Parliament as well as contribute to Scottish Government consultations and parliamentary committee inquiries.

Over the last year, we have worked with **BBC Scotland, STV, The Herald, The Scotsman** and many other news outlets to highlight the issues facing autistic people and families.

Belief 1: Support

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

We're here to support the 56,000 autistic people in Scotland 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.

“To see my son in a better place mentally has made all the difference to his self-esteem. I feel so grateful that he has this and I just want to say a huge thank you to everyone.”

Parent of participant in our Moving Forward with Cashback Programme

Ambition 1

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

We'll start by:

- supporting autistic people wishing to seek elected office
- supporting our branches with tools and guidance to influence local decision makers, including engaging with councillors, MSPs and public consultations
- providing a platform for autistic people to influence through social media and the media
- leading by example by ensuring autistic people shape our services and campaigns.

Ambition 2

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

We'll start by:

- ensuring person-centred planning is at the heart of our approach to service delivery and promoted to others
- developing more mentoring opportunities within communities
- developing our social programmes to support a diverse range of autistic people at different life stages
- bringing different people from different backgrounds and different life skills into our workforce to better reflect the people we support.

Ambition 3

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

We'll start by:

- building on the success of Moving Forward with Cashback to deliver employment support directly to autistic people
- promoting and celebrating role models across a diverse range of careers
- developing an autism friendly award for employers
- creating guidance and tools that help autistic people find fulfilling opportunities and progress in them.

Ambition 4

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

We'll start by:

- building and supporting peer-to-peer networks
- developing our post diagnostic support offer to those who've had a recent diagnosis
- launching a Wills and Trusts service in Scotland to support older parent carers
- exploring anticipatory care needs for families and time-limited interventions which support transitions.

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.

“I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to make a change, I wanted to be part of this movement of helping people to understand autism. It's such an amazing experience, you get so much out of it. You make new connections and realise how much of a difference you can make.”

Branch volunteer

Ambition 1

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

We'll start by:

- supporting work at a UK level to define what accessibility looks like for autistic people across the spectrum, including the design of public spaces
- working in partnership with other organisations developing public spaces or delivering services
- promoting good practice case studies of inclusive design
- launching a new Autism Friendly Award in Scotland for businesses.

Ambition 2

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

We'll start by:

- ensuring that autism understanding is a mandatory part of Initial Teacher Education
- encouraging more schools in Scotland to complete the Inclusion Award
- continuing to offer personalised support for students within further and higher education
- challenging the high level of exclusions, both legal and illegal, by building on the success of the *Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved* campaign.

Ambition 3

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

We'll start by:

- continuing to campaign for a Commissioner in law to challenge poor practice and lever positive change
- campaigning to reduce diagnosis waiting times and improve access to post diagnostic support
- working closely with healthcare link staff to ensure autistic people's needs are met and understood
- encouraging positive system and culture changes within social care and mental health law reforms.

Ambition 4

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

We'll start by:

- creating an employer kitemark to make systems and cultures more inclusive
- offering bespoke training to employers, co-delivered with autistic people
- promoting good practice case studies of inclusive employers
- providing clear information, advice and guidance about employing autistic people, with the focus on inclusion, reasonable adjustments and culture change.

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 love being involved in the branch, it's my way of giving back for all the support I've received from other parents and carers when my son was first diagnosed autistic. Now being able to hand down that advice and support to others is a real privilege.”

Branch volunteer

Ambition 1

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

We'll start by:

- providing comprehensive and trusted information on autism to the general public
- participating in the UK-wide, always-on campaign for autism understanding and acceptance
- providing specific awareness and understanding sessions to decision makers and influencers such as the Press and MSPs, co-delivered with autistic people.

Ambition 2

Autistic stereotypes and misinformation are challenged and stigma is ended

We'll start by:

- ensuring misinformation and stereotypes are challenged through our information, advice and guidance
- being bold and brave and challenging the portrayal of stereotypes in the media and within society
- ensuring we platform a diverse range of views and experience from across the spectrum.

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 good practice resources with those who need them
- collaborating with researchers and encouraging and supporting the participation of autistic people
- continuing to promote the deepening of understanding and acceptance.

Ambition 4

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

We'll start by:

- providing advice, guidance and support for families, friends and allies to build their own capacity to push for change
- collaborating with other organisations locally or nationally
- supporting our branches to collaborate with organisations locally.



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

How we'll deliver this strategy

We recognise that to achieve these ambitions, 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 action.

To support our strategy in Scotland:

- We'll ensure that autistic people play a meaningful role in designing and shaping our services.
- We'll improve our internal communications so that the different teams and our branches across Scotland have a clearer understanding of our work and how they can contribute.
- We'll ensure that the information we provide for autistic people and families is clear, relevant, up-to-date and easily accessible.
- We'll become the best employer of autistic staff and provide opportunities for every employee to learn, progress and enjoy work.

To support our strategy at a UK level:

- We'll further develop sustainable financial models to support the long-term delivery of our vision and strategy.
- We'll demonstrate an exemplary approach to safeguarding, governance, risk and health and safety in delivering high-quality services.
- We'll champion technology internally and externally as a way to improve the lives of autistic people.
- We'll establish a new operating and decision-making model so that we can effectively and efficiently deliver our strategy for the benefit of all autistic people.
- We'll deliver high-impact fundraising approaches, exceptional supporter care and experience, and compelling storytelling to demonstrate impact.
- We'll coordinate and harmonise the ways that autistic people, families and others can contribute to, be involved with and relate to our charity.



**Thank
you**

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

Join Team Autism

Run a marathon, take part in the Kiltwalk, cycle round the park or hold an online quiz to raise money and help transform the lives of autistic people.

Campaign with us

Lobby your local MP, MSP, council and businesses to ensure autistic people get the support and services they're entitled to.

Make a gift

Your contributions fund vital services and help transform the lives of autistic people.

Volunteer with us

Find out about the variety of volunteer roles currently available, including working with our local branches.

Become a member

Join over 1,200 like-minded people and receive our quarterly *Your Autism* magazine, Scotland's *News and Views*, expert advice and other benefits.

To find out more about our work in Scotland and to sign up for *News and Views* and other Scotland bulletins, visit www.autism.org.uk/scotland

**The National Autistic Society Scotland
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 the more than 56,000 autistic adults and children in Scotland, as well as their family members and carers. For more than 25 years, 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/scotland

