

Adaptations and Reasonable Adjustments for Autistic People in Housing – User Guide

Autistic people should have the same access and ability to live a dignified and independent life in the community as everyone else. An important factor in achieving this is the availability of high-quality and accessible housing that can meet the needs of a diverse population.

However, autistic people can often find themselves living in homes that are not suited to their needs. Ultimately, this can have a significant impact on their mental health, life-satisfaction, and the right to enjoy life independently in the community.

Issues with accessibility in housing may be particularly prevalent in the private and social rental sectors, where the home environment is often designed for the general non-autistic population. However, through adaptations and reasonable adjustments, it is possible to make the rental home environment better suit the needs of autistic individuals.

As such, it is important that autistic people have access to information on adaptations and adjustments, so they can make informed choices about what makes the right home for them. This user guide is intended for autistic adults (who may also have a learning disability) who are looking to navigate the rental market, or are currently living independently in rental properties.

Landlords and those working for local housing authorities may also find this guide useful to better understanding the kinds of adjustments autistic people might need.

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Autistic Adults and Housing

The importance of ensuring appropriate and accessible housing cannot be understated. According to [the 2019-20 English Housing Survey Home Adaptations Report](#), around 1.9m (8%) of households have health conditions that require adaptations. Despite this, the [Equalities and Human Rights Commission](#) (EHRC) has found that disabled people are not getting the adaptations and support they need to live independently.

Autistic people, in particular, may be overlooked when it comes to accessibility in housing; despite progress being made, greater understanding of autism is needed throughout society, and some landlords and local authority decision makers may misunderstand or underestimate the harm that can arise from an inaccessible or poor sensory home environment.

The Government's [Building the Right Support Action Plan](#), which aims to reduce the number of autistic people and people with a learning disability detained in mental health hospitals, recognises that: "people with a learning disability and autistic people should live in their own home and have the right support in place to live an ordinary life", meaning that "people live ordinary lives on ordinary streets".

For many autistic people, living an ordinary life may mean living independently in a home that is adapted and adjusted to ensure it provides a secure and welcoming environment, as all homes should. This is key to life satisfaction and can reduce the risk of mental ill-health.

Whilst autism itself is not a mental health condition, many autistic people suffer from a co-existing mental health issue, such as anxiety or depression. An inaccessible home environment can be particularly damaging for those with mental ill-health, and can lead to the worsening of mental health problems or even hospitalisation. This may be especially true for those who have recently been discharged, where the distress caused by the wrong home environment could lead to readmission.

Importantly, being at risk of, or suffering from, mental ill-health does not mean autistic people cannot live independently in their own homes, and this is recognised through NHS England's 2016 [Building the Right Home](#) guidance. It is therefore crucial that autistic people are able to get the adjustments and adaptations needed to live comfortably in their own homes.

Private Rent and Social Housing

With house prices rising, rental tenancies have expanded over the past few decades, meaning that many autistic people may be private or social rental tenants. Whilst there are schemes that can help autistic people and people with a learning disability to own their own home, such as the [Home Ownership for People with Long-Term Disabilities \(HOLD\) scheme](#), this can be a large commitment, and many people may prefer to live independently in a rental home.

A private rental property can be any form of home (e.g., a flat or a house), that is owned by a landlord, who could be an individual or a property company. The property is then let out to a tenant who will have signed a contract for an agreed monthly fee and length of tenancy.

Depending on the preferences of the landlord, they may choose to communicate directly with tenants, or delegate this responsibility to an intermediary that manages their property (e.g., an estate agent or management company). Whilst rental properties can be unfurnished, many now come with some furnishings and appliances provided by the landlord, and some may also come fully furnished.

A social housing property is any home which is owned by local housing authorities or housing associations (not-for-profit organisations). Social housing is given to those who are most at need within a local area and who are on the local housing register. The amount paid in rent is tied to local incomes, meaning it is usually more affordable than private rent.

Additionally, the tenancy is usually for longer periods of time than private rental properties, meaning that social housing is commonly a more secure type of rental housing. [A report by the EHRC](#) found that disabled people are typically more likely to live in a social rented property as local authorities are assumed to be more willing to make adaptations and adjustments.

Currently, there is a shortage of social homes across the country, and people applying for social housing can find themselves on long waiting lists. This may mean you could be offered temporary accommodation, which may not meet your needs and the wait for a permanent home can be particularly distressing.

Whilst local housing authorities should make adjustments to find you a home in an area that meets your accessibility needs, a lack of social housing may mean there is less choice about the exact area you will be living in, and this may mean compromising on some expectations.

Given that private and social rental homes are meant to appeal to a wide range of people, with various tenants coming and going, they are often made to conform to a neurotypical and able-bodied environment. However, many of the adjustments and adaptations related to accessible housing will also be helpful to a wide variety of people in the general public and, [as a report by the National Residential Landlords Association](#) stated, there is consensus that the demand for adapted and accessible properties in the private rented sector is rising.

Intro to Reasonable Adjustments and Adaptations

To be able to understand how reasonable adjustments and adaptations can help you to live independently and enjoy your home, it is important to discuss what is generally meant by a 'reasonable adjustment' and an 'adaptation'.

The main legislation that deals with reasonable adjustments is the Equality Act 2010. Disability is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, and the [Equality Act guidance](#) on the definition of disability states that "a disability can arise from a wide range of impairments which can be: developmental, such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)".

Under the Equality Act, landlords are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable disabled people to fully access the property they are renting. Reasonable adjustments can mean ensuring the process of navigating the rental market is accessible, as well as minor amendments to the physical home environment. This could include making sure that clear and easy to read instruction are provided for appliances within the property (such as heating systems), all electrical switches are clearly labelled, and that landlords or estate agents communicate with you in your preferred method.

Usually, reasonable adjustments protected under the Equality Act will require minimal disruption to the structure or fabric of the home and do not come at a great cost. If this is not the case, then the adjustments may be deemed to be 'unreasonable', and this will not be protected under the law. However, there are no set parameters for what is deemed 'reasonable', and this will largely be interpretative.

Adaptations are changes to the home environment that can range from minor to complex changes to the home structure, layout, or environment, and may require funding – this is usually achieved through the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) on which more information is provided below. Adaptations may include changing the bathroom into a wet room or adapting heating or lighting controls to make them easier to use.

It is also important to make a distinction between adaptations, adjustments, and repairs. Adaptations and adjustments are those things that are needed for disabled people to enjoy a home at the same level as everyone else. However, repairs are typically the responsibility of the landlord, and should be carried out immediately regardless of whether the tenant is disabled or not.

Disabled Facilities Grants and Adaptations

If you need an adaptation in your rental property to make it more accessible to you, you may want to apply for means-tested funding and help to have the works carried out. For those in England, the most common type of funding comes from the [Disabled Facilities Grant](#) (DFGs).

DFGs are intended to help facilitate the adaptation of homes, with the [guidance on DFGs](#) stating that the “Government’s ambition is to give more people the choice to live independently and healthily in their own homes for longer, with fewer people staying in hospital unnecessarily or moving to residential care prematurely when that is not where they want to live”. Autistic people and people with a learning disability are specifically mentioned in the guidance as people who may benefit from DFGs.

Some of the general types of adaptations that DFGs can cover include:

- Making entry into rooms more accessible by widening doors and installing ramps
- Installing a stair lift or a downstairs bathroom
- Placing handrails around the home
- Providing adaptations which can improve safety, including better lighting and softer furnishings
- Adapting appliances, such as heating or lighting, to make them easier to use

Whilst these are common adaptations for disabled people in general, it may be particularly important for autistic people to get further adaptations to the sensory environment through a DFG; it is likely that sensory issues that necessitate adaptations will be protected under the Equality Act if they have a substantial impact on your daily life, and local authorities will have to consider this as they would any other disability.

DFGs are overseen at a local level, and they are open to people of all ages and tenures, including those who are renting privately. If you qualify for a DFG, then the local authority has a statutory duty to provide adaptations for you under the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. Whilst social housing tenants are entitled to apply for a DFG, the local authority will often fund the work through other means.

Both tenants and private landlords can apply for a DFG. The local housing authority will then assess the application and cover the costs of the adaptation if approved; however, it is usually expected that you will continue to live in the adapted property for at least five years. Local authorities can have different requirements for the approval of DFGs, and you should check your local council website for detailed information.

The DFG is means-tested for people over 17 years old, meaning that if you earn an income that is above a certain level, you may be required to pay for some or all of the adaptation unless you are exempt. However, landlords can get a grant without any means test, if they plan to let to another disabled tenant if you leave within five years.

To approve the application, local authorities must be content that the work is reasonable. However, as per the Equality Act, they cannot discriminate against anyone for reasons related to their disability, including autism. The local authority may send an occupational therapist to visit your home to verify the need for the adaptation, as well as consult with social services.

Whilst landlords cannot obstruct you from submitting a DFG application, permission from the landlord will be needed to carry out any works. However, under the Equality Act the landlord can only refuse to cooperate with an adaptation if there is adequate reason not to. In rare circumstances, if a local authority thinks a landlord has been unreasonable or has attached unreasonable conditions to the consent of the adaptation, the application can be processed without the landlord's consent. However, this does not mean that works will take place.

It is important to note that the process of applying for an adaptation through a DFG may be lengthy. You may wish to ask for reasonable adjustments when attending meetings to ensure that any assessments are conducted with these in mind, and that the times of these meetings work for you.

Research by the [National Residential Landlords Association](#) has shown that 79% of landlords are not aware of DFGs at all. You may want to leave adequate room to discuss adapting your rental property with the landlord beforehand and make them aware of the possibility of funding through a DFG.

If you need additional support, Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs) can help advise and provide extra information when making adaptations and applying for DFGs.

Links for information on housing assistance in the devolved nations are available in the further reading section at the end of this user guide.

Considerations and Reasonable Adjustments when Navigating the Rental Market

Before moving in or deciding on a rental home, there are a range of factors that you may want to consider.

In particular, the location of the home is very important as there can be external accessibility issues that will be beyond your control. One of the benefits of renting from a private landlord is that you will have greater control over the location of your rental home. This is a bit more difficult when applying for social housing as there is a shortage of homes available, and finding the right home might cause further delays; however, local authorities should consider the area and your accessibility requirements when finding you social housing.

Things to think about when choosing a rental home can include:

- The distance to and accessibility of the nearest shops
- Whether there is good public transport or carparking nearby
- Whether the home has access to enough natural sunlight
- Whether the property has a garden or an outdoor area (such as a balcony)
- Whether the property is the right size for you and contains enough room for storage, activities, or working from home
- Whether there any lengthy construction works being carried out or about to begin nearby
- Whether there any flight paths that go over the home that could cause disturbance
- Whether there any trainlines nearby
- The distance to the nearest school or playground
- The distance of the home from friends and family

Once you have located a rental home, the next step is to arrange viewings to make sure that it can meet your needs and assess what adjustments or adaptations might be needed. Information on the accessibility of properties is not often shared upfront, you may therefore need to ask a landlord or estate agent to share further information in a manner accessible to you and discuss with them your particular accessibility requirements. Under the Equality Act, you cannot be rejected for a tenancy on the basis of your disability and accessibility requirements.

You may wish to ask for reasonable adjustments when arranging in-person viewings of the rental home. This could include:

- Arranging the viewing for a time of day that works for you
- Asking for additional time to conduct a viewing
- Asking whether current tenants (if they are at home during the visit) could consider the sensory environment and make it as neutral as possible (e.g. not using strong smelling cleaning products before a visit or keeping noise to a minimum).

Alternatively, you may also wish to arrange a virtual viewing of the property and ask the landlord or estate agent to show you different areas of the home. In either case you may want to plan a list of questions you would like to ask, and areas in the

property you would like to see, in order to assess whether the home fits your accessibility requirements.

For general communication, you may want to make estate agents and local housing authorities aware of any preferred communication methods. For instance, you may prefer to communicate over email rather than phone. You may also ask for the landlord or estate agent to ring at a certain time and ask for time to prepare for any conversations in advance.

You should carefully read through any tenancy agreement before signing it. Whilst most landlords or estate agents will send over an electronic contract, you may wish to ask the landlord or estate agent if they can print one out for you. If you are having any reservations about signing the contract, or are having difficulty in understanding some sections, you may want to ask the landlord for further time to go through the tenancy agreement with someone you trust, such as a friend or family member. You may also want to ensure that any accessibility requirements and reasonable adjustments are met before moving into the property as a condition of signing the contract.

Once a tenancy agreement has been signed, you may want to ask for adjustments to facilitate your move in. For instance, you could ask your landlord or an estate agent who is familiar with the property to label any switches in the house to prevent confusion and distress. You may also want to ask for clear instructions to be provided on how to use appliances included in the rental property if the instruction manuals are not provided or they are inaccessible. Finally, you may want to ask your landlord to familiarise you with all of the safety equipment included in the house, including fire alarms, fire extinguishers, and fire blankets.

To summarise, when looking for a rental home you may want to ask for:

- Accessibility information on the property to be shared in a manner accessible to you;
- Viewings to be arranged for a time that works for you;
- Additional time to conduct viewings;
- Current tenants/landlords to consider the sensory environment when you view the property;
- A virtual viewing to be arranged;
- Landlords, estate agents, or local authorities to communicate through your preferred method(s);
- Pre-arranged phone calls;
- Landlords or estate agents to provide a printed version of the contract;
- Extra time to consider signing the contract and discuss it with someone you trust;
- The landlord to familiarise you with all the safety equipment included in the property;
- Any switches in the home to be clearly labelled before moving in.

Adaptations and Reasonable Adjustments for Your Home

Autistic people who want to live independently may find that further adaptations and adjustments are needed to be able to feel empowered, safe, and comfortable in their rental homes. This may be particularly true for those who have sensory sensitivities that can cause distress, and for those who have suffered traumatic experiences in the past. Adaptations and adjustments in this case can make the home environment more predictable, less overwhelming, and easily navigable.

The following sections contain a list of adaptations and reasonable adjustments that autistic people may be able to ask for in their rental home. Whether these suggestions count as 'reasonable' will be based on the individual circumstances, and in some cases a landlord may dispute the 'reasonableness' of the adjustment. If this is the case, you may find it easier to make any changes by yourself or at your own expense. However, if this would consist of significant material changes to the home environment it is likely that the landlord's permission is required. Alternatively, you or your landlord may wish to apply for a DFG to have a necessary adaptation fitted.

Whether the landlord is responsible for carrying out an adjustment may also be dependent on other factors, such as:

- Whether the home is furnished or not (if it is unfurnished, any changes concerning furniture will usually be your responsibility);
- Whether the responsibility for an adjustment lies with building management rather than a landlord (e.g., in communal areas).

These sections have been divided by room type. However, many of these adaptations and adjustments could be made to any room within a home.

It is important to note that there is no set list of adaptations and adjustments, and what works for one individual may be very different to another. All autistic people are different, and some may frequently experience sensory over-stimulation, whilst others may need additional stimulation in their environment and seek out certain sensations. However, these suggestions might give you some things to think about.

Bedroom

Bedrooms are arguably one of the most important rooms of the house, as they provide a space for relaxation and sleep, which consequently can help alleviate stress and improve quality of life. However, some autistic people may find it difficult to fully access this space if noise and light from outside of the bedroom is making it hard to sleep.

To make this room more accessible to you, you could think about:

- Existing curtains and blinds to be replaced with blackout blinds, which can help to block out all forms of external light;
- Sound proofing to be added to the walls to dampen noise;
- Windows to be better soundproofed and sealed, or switched out for double or triple glazed windows which are better at reducing noise;

- Existing bedroom furniture to be moved from one room to another that is less affected by external noise;
- An existing mattress that is causing you sensory issues to be replaced by one that is more comfortable.

Living Room

Living rooms are the spaces in which many people like to spend most of their time. They are areas in which to relax or to enjoy entertainment and are highly important for downtime. It is therefore important that the living room is accessible to you.

To make this room more accessible to you, you could think about:

- The wallpaper or colour of the walls to be changed to fit your accessibility needs. For example, redecorating in neutral colours if the existing wallpaper contains lots of colours or patterns that can make the environment overwhelming;
- Installing a carpet if the home has hard flooring. Carpets can help soak up general noise, as well as softening the sound of footsteps or falling objects;
- Existing patterned or colourful carpets that are causing sensory issues to be replaced;
- Any newly installed carpets to be free of strong-smelling chemicals;
- Existing furniture to be rearranged or removed to ensure the room is easily navigable and visual clutter is minimised;
- Asking for existing hard furniture to be replaced with soft furnishings, which help soften noise and are less likely to cause harm if bumped into.

Bathroom

An inaccessible bathroom can have severe consequences for personal hygiene and general health. One of the most common adaptations for bathrooms is the conversion into wet rooms, which can be particularly helpful for those with mobility issues. However, there are also several adjustments and adaptations that can be made to the sensory environment which may be particularly important for autistic people.

To make this room more accessible to you, you could think about:

- The temperature unit of the shower to be adapted to make it easier to use to prevent any discomfort or risk of scalding;
- Thermostatic controlled taps to be installed to give you greater control over water temperature;
- Existing shower heads or shower units to be replaced with one which allows you to control the flow of water so that it is not too uncomfortable;
- Shower curtains to be replaced with a glass pane to prevent any sensory issues that can arise from colourful or damp curtains and noisy curtain rails;
- The extractor fan to be wired so that it can be turned on or off independently of the bathroom lights;
- A new quieter extractor fan to be installed.

Kitchen

Kitchens are usually a busy area and can be very noisy.

To make this room more accessible to you, you could think about:

- Kitchen cupboards and drawers to be fitted with soft closing mechanisms to reduce noise and prevent slamming;
- Certain appliances (e.g., washing machines and tumble dryers) to be moved to other areas of the house where they will cause less noise disturbance;
- Some noisy appliances to be switched out and exchanged for quieter ones;
- Ovens or hobs to be adapted or replaced to ones that are easier to use and more accessible and show the current temperature clearly to reduce the risk of burning.

Outdoor Space

Outdoor spaces can provide a place of sanctuary, particularly for autistic people who are feeling anxious or overwhelmed and need a quiet place to relax.

To make outdoor areas more accessible to you, you could think about:

- Natural sound blockers, such as shrubs, to be installed to the perimeter of the garden to help soak up noise;
- Fences to be heightened to help block out external factors in the environment which can be overwhelming, and make the garden feel quieter and calmer;
- Outdoor lighting to be installed to help improve visibility and reduce anxiety when spending time outdoors in the evening;
- Talking to the landlord or building management to ensure that communal outdoor spaces have an area that is accessible to you, including implementation of a quiet space and reminding other residents not to make too much noise in the area.

Communal Areas

Some rental homes may have areas which are shared communally, including hallways, lounges, or gyms. You may want to ask for reasonable adjustments to be made to these areas so you can enjoy them on an equal basis with other residents.

To make communal areas more accessible to you, you could ask for:

- Prior warning before any fire alarms are tested;
- Prior notice of any works being carried out in the building that may cause noise disturbance from drilling or hammering;
- Cleaners of communal areas to adjust the type of cleaning products used to ensure they do not contain strong-smelling chemicals;
- Communal bins to be moved further away from your home, or ventilation systems improved to help prevent odours;
- Furniture that is difficult to navigate or easily bumped into to be moved or removed;
- The types of artificial lighting used to be changed to fit your accessibility needs;

- Doors outside your home to be fitted with soft closing mechanisms to prevent slamming;
- The concierge and other building staff to be aware of your needs and communicate via your preferred method.

Miscellaneous

There are several adjustments and adaptations that can apply to all rooms in your home.

You could think about asking for:

- The landlord to replace bright fluorescent lights with LED lights or halogen light bulbs;
- Dimmer switches to be installed in rooms to enable better control over the brightness and consistent lighting between areas;
- Trees and shrubs to be cut back regularly, or removed altogether, to ensure that natural light is let in;
- Handrails to be installed throughout the home to help you navigate the home environment
- Washable paint to be added to the walls which can be useful if you tend to navigate using your hands;
- The existing doorbell to be replaced with one where the volume and ringtone can be adjusted, or contains a video system which will allow you to see who is at the door;
- Heating controls to be adapted to make them simpler to use and control panels to be added to rooms throughout the home;
- Radiator covers to be added around the house or low surface temperature radiators to be installed to prevent risk of injury through burning;
- Any fresh painting to be done with paints that do not contain strong-smelling chemicals.

Resources and Further Reading

For information on housing adjustments see:

- The Equality and Human Rights Commission's [housing adaptations guide for disabled people](#)
- Citizens Advice information on [getting help with home improvements](#)
- NDTi's report on [meeting the sensory needs of autistic people in housing](#)
- The Challenging Behaviour Foundation's [Planning Your House Information Pack](#)
- The National Residential Landlord's Association's [Adaptations Good Practice Guide](#)

For information on the Equality Act 2010 and reasonable adjustments see:

- The National Autistic Society's information on [asking for reasonable adjustments](#)
- Citizen's Advice information on [disability discrimination](#)

For information on Disabled Facilities Grants and Home Improvement Agencies see:

- The Government's information on [Disabled Facilities Grants](#)
- The [Home Improvement Agency Directory](#)
- The House of Commons Library's [overview of Disabled Facilities Grants](#)
- Adapt My Home's [DFG Self-Assessment Portal](#)

For information on adapting your home in devolved nations see:

- [Information on home adaptations in Wales](#)
- [Information on home adaptations in Northern Ireland](#)
- [Information on home adaptations in Scotland](#)
- Citizens Advice Scotland [information on housing adaptations](#)

For information on Home Ownership for People with Long-Term Disabilities (HOLD) see:

- Government information on [Home Ownership for People with Long-Term Disabilities](#)
- Local Government Association's [HOLD Factbook](#)

For information on Building the Right Support see:

- The Government's [Building the Right Support Action Plan](#)
- [Building the Right Home](#)