

The National Autistic Society's

# **General Election Campaign Toolkit for NAS branches**

**#ChangeTheConversation**



**National  
Autistic  
Society**



# How to use this toolkit

Change the  
Conversation

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

This toolkit has been designed to support your branch to **campaign in a way that works for you, however you want to use your voices**.

## Express yourself

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

If you need support to explain the communication needs of your branch and the people it supports while campaigning let us know at **[campaign@nas.org.uk](mailto:campaign@nas.org.uk)**



# Our Manifesto



Change the  
Conversation

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

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

Just 26% of autistic children<sup>1</sup> feel happy at school. In 2021 data showed autistic students were more than twice as likely to get excluded as non-SEND peers<sup>2</sup> and seven in ten autistic students say their teachers don't understand them.<sup>3</sup> There must be mandatory training for all school staff on autism and delays in Education Health and Care Plans must be urgently addressed.

## **End the autism diagnosis crisis**

172,022 patients have an open referral for suspected autism. 86% of those people have been waiting longer than the NICE recommended 13 weeks.<sup>4</sup> All parties should set a target date by which no one is waiting longer than 13 weeks and ensure that everyone has suitable pre- and post-diagnostic support.

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

There are 2,045 autistic people<sup>5</sup> and people with learning disabilities in inpatient mental health hospitals in England. The Mental Health Act 1983 must be amended as soon as possible, so that autistic people can no longer be detained just because they are autistic. There must also be significant, long-term funding for community mental health and social care services.

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

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

## **Introduce mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030**

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

# Complying with the Lobbying Act

The logo consists of two overlapping circles. The left circle is dark blue and the right circle is a gradient of blue and purple. The text "Change the Conversation" is written in white, with "Change the" on the top line and "Conversation" on the bottom line, centered over the circles.

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During a General Election, all charities must comply with the Lobbying Act, which is a piece of legislation that makes sure we don't influence voting and remain politically neutral. If you are doing anything where you represent the National Autistic Society - whether that's online or offline - you must follow these laws. It's nothing to be worried about, but we've put together some helpful dos and don'ts that explain some of the implications:

## In general:

- **Don't** be party political. This means treating each political party the same. When you are representing the National Autistic Society, you will need to be totally impartial, despite your personal political views.
- **Do** be clear in your personal social media bio that your views are your own.

## If you are running an account on behalf of your NAS branch:

- **Do** take steps to make sure you're being politically impartial online if your branch has a Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or other social media page or website. This also applies if you tweet about the National Autistic Society.
- **Do** focus on what we're looking to change going forward - but don't tag individual candidates and don't rate political parties' policies against each other.

- **Do** be careful about what you retweet or repost. For example, if you're reposting a National Autistic Society post, stay away from offering commentary on individual political party policies or ranking them. If you need a steer on what the National Autistic Society is saying about a particular policy announcement check either the main social media account or contact the campaigns team.
- **Do** get in touch with **[campaign@nas.org.uk](mailto:campaign@nas.org.uk)** if you have any doubts!
- **Don't** criticise individual parties or their policies. You can talk about the issues that matter to autistic people and what we're calling on the next Government to change. When you are representing the National Autistic Society, you need to remain politically neutral.
- **Don't** promote individual candidates or the parties they represent - either online or offline. We need to make sure we're not influencing anyone's decision about how they're going to vote. Our role is to raise awareness of the issues that need addressing - for example highlighting the long waits people face for educational support and diagnosis. All political parties need to address these problems but don't say we think 'X' party will fix this better than another.

# Getting in touch with candidates



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

You can find out which candidates are standing for election in your area by visiting [www.whocanivotefor.co.uk](http://www.whocanivotefor.co.uk) or by using Wikipedia. These sites will be continuously updated, and when the General Election is officially called, about six weeks before election day, they will be updated to include all the official candidates.

If you need to use alternative communication methods or would prefer to share information in a particular way, ask your candidate how they can facilitate this.

## Tips

1. Include personal stories if you have consent to do so. Candidates are interested in the real experiences of their potential constituents. It is their role to represent you and sharing the ways that Government policy directly impacts you and the people that your branch supports.
2. Share your communication needs with candidates. This can be a great way to improve understanding and highlight the need to make engaging with politicians more accessible.
3. Carry on communicating. It may take a while to receive a response from a candidate but don't be afraid to reply again and keep the conversation going. If your branch is able to facilitate an online or in person meeting you could suggest this. You may also want to explain some of the challenges autistic people face during meetings and ways that they can be made easier.
4. If you are writing to a candidate be specific and concise. Candidates are often very busy and receive correspondence about all sorts of issues. We've included a template below for letters and emails to help you to share your message effectively.
5. Tell candidates about our Understanding Autism sessions. The National Autistic Society offers Understanding Autism sessions to all political candidates. Let candidates know that they can sign up by emailing [campaign@nas.org.uk](mailto:campaign@nas.org.uk)



**Click here to use  
our template**

# Questions to ask

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Conversation**

In your emails to or conversations with candidates you may also want to include some of the questions below on key issues for your branch members.

## Questions

### Education

- If elected how will your party reform the education system so that all autistic children have a suitable school place and an Education Health and Care Plan if needed?
- If elected will your party commit to mandatory all school staff training on autism?

### Diagnosis

- 86% of people waiting for an autism diagnostic assessment have been waiting longer than the NICE recommended 13 weeks. If elected what will your party do to bring down autism diagnosis waiting times?
- Will your party commit to a target date for reducing waiting times for autism assessment?
- How will your party improve the availability of pre and post diagnostic support for autistic people?

### Mental Health

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

### Employment

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

### Mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030

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



# Posting on social media

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

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

## Tips:

1. Make sure to follow the guidance set out in the '**Complying with the Lobbying Act**' section of this guide.
2. Use the hashtag **#ChangeTheConversation**
3. Encourage conversations and responses. For example, you could end your post with a question.
4. Include examples and make use of different methods of communication whether that's through art, video, words or something totally different.



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

# Posting on social media

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## Here are some examples of social media posts for inspiration:

- In the run up to the General Election, [name of branch] is campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** about autism. What do you wish every politician understood about autism?
- [name of your branch] is campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** because our voices deserve to be heard. We're asking every political party to commit to mandatory autism training for all public services staff by 2030. Will you join us?
- Only 29% of autistic people are in paid work. [Name of your branch] is campaigning to **#ChangeTheConversation** because every political party must hear directly from autistic people about barriers to employment.
- Before the next general election, [name of your branch] wants every politician to understand that timely access to autism diagnosis can stop thousands from reaching crisis point. What do you want every politician to know? **#ChangeTheConversation**.
- We must **#ChangeTheConversation** about autism so our voices can be heard. Before the next general election, [name of your branch] wants every politician to understand that nobody should be detained in mental health hospitals just for being autistic.
- Talking to politicians can be exhausting, especially if you're masking. We need them to be open minded about how they can learn from their constituents and **#ChangeTheConversation**. If you could communicate with your MP on your terms, how would it go?





# Endnotes



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



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