

All-Age Autism Strategy

2022 to 2027

Footnote

Throughout this strategy, the term a 'person with autism' is used. It is recognised that when describing people there is no single term that everyone prefers. Other labels will include terms like 'Autistic' and 'Autism Spectrum Condition' (ASC), whereas medical terminology has historically used 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD).

Locally we prefer to talk about the person, their strengths, wishes and goals before any condition. Our communities use a variety of positive terminology and language - we recognise it's an individual's preference as to their identity.

There are also references to language such as 'neurodiverse' or 'neurodivergent' that celebrates neurodevelopmental conditions which cover an umbrella of conditions including autism.

We celebrate and champion difference in all our community. Whilst we aim through this strategy to be the voice of our autism community, these terms are merely to ensure the wider population understands who in the community this strategy is referencing.

Please note:

All the photos in this document are stock imagery.

Some percentages will add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

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Foreword

The aim of the strategy is to support people with autism and their families or carers, living and working in the borough. We want them to have full access to educational, work and leisure opportunities so that they can play their full role within society.

On behalf of the London Borough of Bromley and the NHS South East London Clinical Commissioning Group (Bromley), the Bromley All-Age Autism Board is delighted to present this All-Age Autism Strategy for the borough, which sets out local priorities for people of all-ages with autism in Bromley.

This strategy has two main aims:

- To ensure there's equality of access to universal services for people with autism
- To ensure specialist services can support people with autism

It has been informed by the views of:

- individuals with autism
- their families, carers and friends
- providers
- our local priorities
- national guidance, policy and legislation

The vision in this strategy is to:

“enable people with autism to live their lives as they choose, as part of their community, with the right support at the right time”

Through our engagement with residents, families, carers, and local professionals a set of five priority areas has been identified to help us deliver our vision:

1. Increase awareness and understanding
2. Build sustainable education placements
3. Support independence and employment
4. Reduce health and care inequalities
5. The right support at the right time

This strategy will be delivered via an accompanying action plan, updated yearly to ensure local priorities are met over the next five years. Priority leads will be identified from across services and the community to drive and deliver positive change.

All organisations involved in developing and implementing this strategy are committed to ensuring that the vision and priorities will be delivered across the next five years.

Over the five years, the offer will be developed with our public sector agencies and our local communities. Continued improvement to the wellbeing of residents will be driven forward, promoting early intervention, prevention, independence, flexibility and choice, supporting local community-based solutions that will supplement and extend the core offer.

The development of the strategy has centred around the involvement of people with autism, their families, and carers. The implementation of the strategy will continue by growing the partnership network and engaging the community services as much as possible to ensure that Bromley is a place that is aware, accepts and supports all its diverse community.

Jason Rose

Chair of our Bromley All-Age Autism Board

Introduction

The Government published the new National Autism Strategy in July 2021 which covers people of all-ages in England for the first time.

In Bromley there has been a focus on improving outcomes for people with autism through the Bromley All-Age Autism Board and its supporting action plan since 2018. The Board is multi-agency with representation from services across education, health and care together with parents, carers and partners in the voluntary and community sector. It brings together a shared investment to bring about positive change and the voice of our autism community.

This strategy:

- has been driven by the Bromley All-Age Autism Board
- outlines the commitment in Bromley to do more to help people with autism
- sets out the objectives and strategic direction across the local area over the next five years
- has been co-produced with people with autism, their families and carers, and professionals across social care, health, education and the voluntary and community services

The strategy is aligned to key priorities across the borough, including:

- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Vision and Priorities for 2019 to 2022, Our Journey to Excellence
- The NHS South East All-Age Autism Strategy for 2021 to 2026
- The Council's corporate strategy for 2021 to 2031, Making Bromley Even Better

It is also aligned to key national legislation and policy.

What's more, this strategy has been developed alongside the borough's Learning Disability Strategy for 2020 to 2025 which supports an estimated 15 to 30% of the autism community who also have a learning disability.

For the large proportion of the autism population who live without a learning disability, it is recognised that this strategy must champion their voice for improvement. The aim is that changes promoted by this strategy will benefit people with autism and other neurodivergent people, whether or not they have a formal autism diagnosis.

The governance and accountability of this strategy is overseen by and aligned to the Bromley All-Age Autism Board, the SEND Governance Board and the Integrated Commissioning Board.

We want to ensure that through the delivery of the strategy people with autism, and their families and carers, develop a clear understanding of how and where improvements are being made. We want them to see where their voice and participation is directly influencing positive change. This is a key element of our User Voice Framework.

Understanding autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

One in 100 people are on the autistic spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways - like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses.

Historically there have been a number of different names given at the point of diagnosis. An individual may have received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, classic autism or even high functioning autism. Nowadays there is one diagnosis/description given and that is Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

***Image:** The Autism spectrum with five labels – motor skills, language, perception, executive functioning and sensory skills.*

In order to receive a diagnosis of ASD a person will need to present with differences in the areas of:

- Social communication and social interaction
- Repetitive and restrictive behaviours

Autistic people may also be over- or under-sensitive to sensory stimulation – or fluctuate between the two. They may be highly focused on particular interests and hobbies and many report struggling with high anxiety levels, especially in social situations.

Boys and men are more likely to receive a diagnosis than girls and women and the ratio is thought to be three to one. Girls and women may present differently to boys and men and are known to mask their challenges, especially in social situations.

We know that not all autistic people have had or would like a diagnostic assessment. The aim is that changes promoted by this strategy will benefit the autistic community as a whole and other neurodivergent people, whether or not they have a diagnosis.

Neurodiversity

Neurodevelopmental conditions (neurodiversity) are caused by differences in early brain development and can affect the way a person processes information, thinks and learns. Autism is one such condition.

Other conditions include specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Tourette Syndrome.

Autistic people may have additional learning disabilities, and this accounts for 15 to 30% of the population.

Under the neurodiversity umbrella

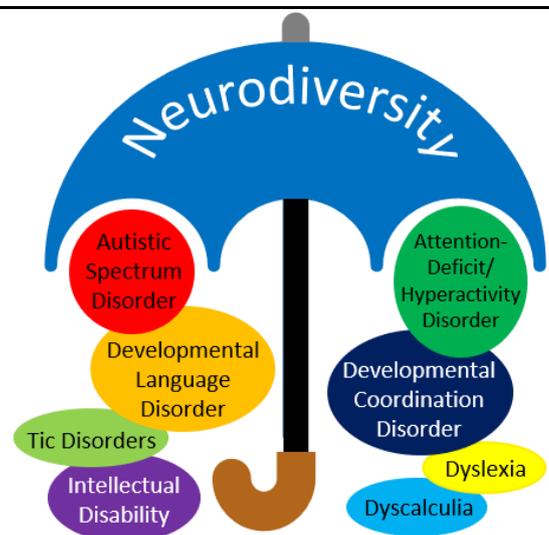
Neurodiversity is a relatively new term, thought to have been coined in the 1990s by Judy Singer, an autistic individual, parent of an autistic child and sociologist.

It was originally used by the autistic community, who were keen to move away from the medical model and dispel the belief that autism is something to be 'treated' and 'cured', rather than an important and valuable part of human diversity.

The idea of neurodiversity has now been embraced by many other groups, who are using the term as a means of empowerment and to promote the positive qualities possessed by those with a neurodevelopmental difference.

It encourages people to view neurodevelopmental differences as natural and normal variations of the human genome. Furthermore, it encourages them to reject the culturally entrenched negativity which has typically surrounded those that live in, learn from and experience the world in a particular way that is sometimes perceived as different.

Image: Open umbrella with the following labels underneath - Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Developmental Language Disorder, Tic Disorders, Intellectual Disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Developmental Coordination Disorder, Dyslexia, and Dyscalculia.



Employment

Autistic people process the world around them differently and this often gives them areas of particular strength and ability, such as strong attention to detail, honesty and punctuality. Despite this very few autistic adults enjoy full-time paid work.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published data that shows only 22% of autistic adults are in any kind of employment.

Co-occurring conditions

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) estimates that around 70% of autistic people have an additional condition, which is “often unrecognised”.

The main conditions that co-occur more frequently in people who have autism compared with the general population can include:

Mental health conditions

Research suggests that 70% of people with autism have a mental health condition and that 40% have two or more conditions.

Emotional health

People with autism are up to four times more likely to have anxiety, and are twice as likely to have depression.

Negative life experiences

Research has shown that people with autism are more vulnerable to negative life experiences, which may also impact mental health.

Lower quality of life

Compared to the general population, people with autism report having a lower quality of life.

A picture of Bromley

National data suggests that an estimated 700,000 people have been diagnosed with autism in the UK, with an estimated prevalence of 1 in every 100 children and 2 in every 100 adults.

Image: Illustration of Bromley borough with neighbouring local authority areas labelled (Kent and Surrey; Bexley, Croydon, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark)

Based on this national prevalence data, we can make informed estimations about the numbers of people with autism in Bromley. There are an estimated 333,000 people currently living in Bromley. Using the national ratios, we estimate that almost 6,000 people with autism live in our borough of which:

- 5,300 are autistic adults (aged 16 and over)
- 700 are autistic children and young people (aged from birth to 15 years old)

Those children and young people who have complex needs will often require an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan. Using this data, we can identify the number of children in our school settings who are eligible for an EHC Plan and whose primary need is related to autism. Based on this data, we know that 4 in 10 children with an EHC Plan have a primary need linked to autism. This forms the most prevalent primary need:

- 22% have a primary need of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)
- 21% have a primary need of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

For those children and young people receiving Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support in Bromley school settings, this rises to 4.7 in 10 children (31% have SLCN and 16% have an ASC).

Just over 300 adults with autism in our borough are known to the Council's Adult Social Care Service. Of these, we know that 95% (286) are aged from 16 to 64 years old, compared to 15 people who are aged 65 and over. This could indicate areas of our community that are not diagnosed who are managing within society and who may have wellbeing needs.

From other national data, we know that 15% to 30% of our autism population will also have a learning disability – some 900 to 1,800 people. These people will be supported through Learning Disability services and their strategy.

National data tells us that 75% of working age adults are in employment. This compares with 52% of those with general disabilities and just 22% of the autism population. Therefore, a key focus for our borough is to support people to bridge these significant gaps of independence by enabling autistic people to access training, employment, and career opportunities.

Our approach

The strategy has two clear aims which will help us to achieve our vision and support us to help people with autism to play their full role within our society.

The two aims are:

- To ensure equality of access to universal services for people with autism
- To ensure specialist services can support people with autism

We want to identify autistic people's needs earlier, improve their physical and mental health and better understand the inequalities people with autism face.

Why do we need this strategy?

Autistic children, young people and adults, and their families and carers, have told us that there are currently significant barriers to achieving our vision across the service system and the wider community.

Addressing these barriers will require a better understanding of autism along with cultural change across both services and our local community. These are not quick adjustments to make, but we know that with focused leadership across the system over time, autistic children, young people and adults can be supported to achieve better life outcomes.

The work of this strategy will need to be embedded in our organisations and the wider community so that it is sustained and can be built on. We are committed to bringing the right people together to break down barriers to community access and use our resources effectively to deliver the support that people need.

Our strategy is here to focus the action of all the partners across Bromley who will work together to make the changes we need to see.

Engagement conversations to develop this strategy

The last two years have been a period of comprehensive and sustained engagement with our autism community to ensure as many views and ideas as possible have contributed to this strategy. Over 530 individuals have contributed their views to help form this strategy.

This has incorporated:

The 100-day Bromley Autism challenge

This involved over 100 individuals from across education, health and social care, people with autism and their families expressing their views about the key issues and subsequent priorities for children and young people with autism aged from birth to 25 years old.

The voice of the adult

To help us better understand the voice of adults with autism in the borough, a series of engagement events took place across the local area to allow young people, adults with autism, their families and carers to share their lived experiences in relation to the national all-age autism priorities. This included specific events for parents and carers as well as a focus group session for people with autism.

The voice of the child

Young advisors from one of our local partners, CASPA, have contributed towards the strategy by advocating for Bromley's autistic community by directly sharing their experiences, ideas and expertise.

The group provides a valuable insight into their world and how Bromley can lead the way in making autistic voices heard. The Young Advisors have relished the opportunity to help 'change the rulebook' in order to make our community more inclusive. As members of the Bromley All-Age Autism Board, they have had the opportunity to showcase their skills and develop their confidence.

The clear message from their engagement with other children and young people with autism was that more support was needed for autistic young people and adults, especially regarding employment, mental health, social connection and independence.

Capturing wider feedback

To support the engagement events, a questionnaire was circulated by partners across the borough. This was aimed at identifying further intelligence about the lived experience of autistic

people of all-ages and their families. The questionnaire was produced in an easy read format to make it as accessible as possible.

52 people responded to the survey. Of these:

- 52% were parents or family members
- 35% were an autistic person
- 10% were professionals
- 2% were carers
- 2% were unknown

By analysing their responses, we identified:

Receiving the right support at the right time

- 78% (of 47 responses) said they had a difficult experience due to lack of support at the right time.
- 73% (of 45 responses) said they had received positive support within the community.
- 44% (of 41 responses) said they have had positive experiences where a Bromley education setting has enabled their child or young person with autism to access the right support.

Find the right employment opportunity

- 26% (of 34 responses) said they had a positive experience into employment.
- 33% (of 33 responses) said they had difficulties finding a job and within employment.

Receiving the best health and care support

- 18% (of 32 responses) said their health and care needs were being met.
- 22% (of 40 responses) said they had received support from inpatient mental health services.
- 78% (of 38 responses) said they needed support with their mental health.
- 25% (of 40 responses) said they had received input from the police and wider criminal and youth justice services.

Local developments

With our joint local authority and NHS approach we have been able to develop our services to be more inclusive for the community, with positive local initiatives that will provide a strong foundation for the strategy to grow.

Some of these include:

Bromley All-Age Autism Board

The Bromley All-Age Autism Board was formed following real success in raising the profile of autism amongst our children and young people services. Despite the pandemic this has grown over the past couple years and formed an all-age focus. With Board members and autism representatives we have an action plan which drives improvements led by professionals, who make positive changes in their service areas.

Autism Education Trust (AET)

The AET started in early 2022 following a drive to improve awareness, understanding and outcomes within education for our students with autism. AET is supported by the Department for Education with programmes that offer professionals training, practical tools and a wealth of free resources to better support autistic children and young people across all education settings. It also uses frameworks and standards to support culture change within Headteachers and senior school leaders. This will see positive changes amongst approaches to supporting students, enabling them to remain in the education setting and support their wellbeing.

Autism Family Support Service

The services provided by Bromley Mencap have offered critical family intervention support. Following engagement with families the service has grown and there is now an autism family support co-ordinator that supports low level intervention and signposting to all services across the borough. If families need more intensive support, they can be triaged to a further 6 to 8 weeks of intervention. Families can move between services as and when they need to.

Autism Champions Development Network

Professionals in the Autism Champions Development Network work together to develop their school-based practices and provisions. Any professional in a school can join the network and can access, free of charge, fortnightly e-Digests and termly Development Network Forums. Autism Champions and Sencos can also access a comprehensive range of produced and sourced autism resources, as well as Autism Supportive Schools reviews.

CASPA

CASPA began supporting children and has grown over the years to provide support to people of all-ages with autism, their families and their carers. Their support ensures people with autism are fulfilling life aspirations, including social, leisure, relationships, support into employment and more. They have also worked closely with the Board to drive the voice of autism and improvements as representatives, including towards this strategy.

Bromley Autism Promise

The Bromley Autism Promise is an initiative driven by the Board in early 2020. It was designed to improve awareness and understanding within community services and organisations, including public services, leisure centres and retail spaces. Organisations are supported to reflect on the service they provide whilst also being supported to make positive changes to their environments, programmes, workforce and employment. They may also receive autism training.

Bromley Well

Bromley Well was launched in October 2017 to help people living in Bromley to improve and maintain their health and wellbeing. They have recently employed an Autism Specific Information and Support Officer to help drive continued improvements for our autism community.

Our vision and priorities

We want Bromley to be a place that offers opportunities for people to live healthy and fulfilling lives, where contributions to local communities are welcomed, supported and valued, and where no-one is left behind.

These opportunities should extend to all people in Bromley with autism, including those without a diagnosis.

Our vision

The vision of this strategy is to:

“enable people living in Bromley with autism to live their lives as they choose, as part of their community, with the right support at the right time”

Our five priorities

Through our engagement conversations, a set of five priority areas has been identified. These are based on the views and feedback we have received that have helped to develop an understanding of what needs to change or improve to make Bromley more aware and inclusive, and open opportunities for our people with autism.

The five priorities are:

1. Increase awareness and understanding
2. Build sustainable education placements
3. Support independence and employment
4. Reduce health and care inequalities
5. The right support at the right time

Delivering the priorities

The strategy will be delivered through the Bromley All-Age Autism Board's Action Plan. Throughout all five priorities the actions outlined in the *What we need to do?* sections will be delivered over the next five years. We will achieve this by creating SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals with priority leads and teams identified from across services and the community. There are some areas of work that straddle more than one priority, and there are some themes that cross all priorities.

We recognise that over the five years of this strategy, further needs may arise and can be added as part of the Bromley All-Age Autism Board's Action Plan.

Priority 1 - Increase awareness and understanding

Theme 1 – Understanding

What people have told us

There is a lack of understanding of people with autism in our families, across our communities and in services.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- grow our community's understanding of autism and other neurodiverse conditions so they can better support people with autism.
- help our professionals, services and local businesses to -
 - feel able to recognise differences and know how best to support people with autism
 - identify where they can make changes to their service delivery to make them inclusive, accessible and helpful to our autistic community

What we need to do

We need to:

- identify those services within our community that need to become autism aware and inclusive so that they can appropriately support people with autism
- identify a sustainable neurodiversity training offer, including Autism Awareness, for our front-line staff and services to help grow understanding and skills for our workforce to support its community
- identify a training offer with partner organisations focused on how we work together to raise the profile and awareness of neurodiversity, including autism, within workforces and the people they support
- increase participation in the Bromley Autism Promise which supports commercial and community businesses to be more aware and welcoming and to offer opportunity to its community

Theme 2 – Self-awareness

What people have told us

People with autism need help to understand themselves, how their autism affects them and what things can help them in their life.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- support people with autism to understand what their autism means to them, their strengths, and skills, so that they can live fulfilling lives.
- make sure our families and carers have access to guidance and advice to enable them to best support their family or person with autism.
- design our services to recognise the support families and carers provide.
- help our families and carers feel knowledgeable and empowered to support their loved ones throughout all stages of their lives.
- raise awareness across services to support professionals to recognise when a person with autism may need support or advice and guidance to achieve their aspirations
- students with autism to be supported to understand what their autism means to them, their strengths and skills, so that they can live fulfilling lives.

What we need to do

We need to:

- continue engagement with our families and carers living with autism to understand what advice, guidance and support they need so they can influence the strategy, year upon year, to better develop services to meet the borough's needs

Theme 3 – Information

What people have told us

People with autism, their families and professionals across Bromley don't know what services and support is available to people with autism across the community.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- know how and where to access information that provides help and guidance

- make sure that our front-line support staff have all the information and guidance required to inform their roles supporting our autism community to provide appropriate support

What we need to do

We need to:

- improve information, guides and general content (including online) to make it more relevant for all people with autism, incorporating pictures, symbols and easy read formats
- roll out a communications campaign across the Bromley All-Age Autism Board partners with the purpose of signposting, accessing support, advice and guidance across all our universal offer and specialist services for autism
- consider how we ensure that information is truly accessible and understood by all people with autism across all partners, including the use of easy read formats and those using non-verbal communication
- review our current information and service advice including directories to ensure, where possible, information can be found easily and all in one place.
- support professionals to build a good knowledge of services available and guide people with autism to appropriate support
- support organisations to look at how accessible their information and advice is to our autism community
- provide clear and accessible advice and guidance to families and carers to signpost support, including our commissioned partners and businesses.

Theme 4 – Training

What people have told us

Front-line and back-office staff need to be better trained on the needs of autistic people.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- grow our community's understanding of neurodiversity to support professionals to recognise difference and know how best to support individuals
- celebrate where organisations have supported the autism community, recognising how they achieved success and encouraging them and other organisations to replicate those methods

What we need to do

We need to:

- work in partnership to better advertise specialist services that offer training, support, advice and guidance for people with autism
- identify gaps in our training offer and quality assure training delivered through the SEND Training Collaborative with a focus on Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Teacher Training, providing an emphasis on every teacher being a teacher of SEND.

Theme 5 – Adaptations

What people have told us

Services need to make better adaptations and adjustments to their services to meet the needs of people with autism.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- highlight the difficulties some people with autism face that prevent them from accessing services, such as difficult environments like public transport and health appointments, so we can consider how we can adjust to provide better access and outcomes for this group

What we need to do

We need to:

- focus on how services are commissioned with autism in mind and how they are designed to support and meet the needs of our autism community
- identify how and where building a partnership approach across the universal offer, specialist services and other organisations will help each other in championing neurodiversity, including autism
- continue to grow the Autism Champion network, to expand our champions' knowledge, and to maintain e-communications to highlight key developments, research and evidenced-based strategies and interventions

Read more

Read all the things that we were told in Appendix A.

Priority 2 - Build sustainable education placements

Theme 1 – Understanding

What people have told us

People working in education settings need a better understanding of autism and its impact on the learning of both children and adults with autism.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- reduce the number of students with autism that have failed placements and recognising the impact of Positive Demand Avoidance (PDA) on accessing education.
- education settings to be inclusive, accessible and able to support their students with autism to reach their full potential
- professionals within schools to grow knowledge and skills that help them to identify individual needs within students

What we need to do

We need to:

- roll out the Autism Education Trust (AET) programmes across all years' education facilities - early years, schools and post 16 – by using the AET frameworks (including the Standards and Competencies) to support individual development of professionals, focus on whole setting development and culture change and progress support through individual pupil development.
- grow the knowledge and understanding of autism through our Champions within education settings.

Theme 2 – Support

What people have told us

People working in education settings should improve their knowledge of autism so they can identify children with undiagnosed autism as early as possible and offer the right tailored help and interventions to meet their holistic needs.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- support and reduce the negative impact a student's mental health has on their education, including those masking their issues within school.
- our education settings to identify neurodiversity within their students from as early as possible
- education settings to share where they have had successes in their approach and support
- our education settings' staff to identify individual needs early, through appropriate training, including students masking issues
- staff within our partner settings are skilled and equipped with the knowledge to support our students with autism

What we need to do

We need to:

- develop a free school to meet local needs, to include our Bromley Autism Centre of Excellence, which will ensure we continue to provide improvements and provision as our borough's needs change.
- Centre of Excellence to become a place for all providers, services and support groups to build a community-led autism support hub.
- identify within existing resources how we develop awareness and approaches for an autism support and training offer for students with autism which is relevant and proportionate to their individual needs.
- explore the link between autism and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) to support Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSLs), Special Educational Needs Coordinators (Sencos) and Mental Health leads to intervene early, using the Mental Health leads network to support EBSA as an agenda item.

Theme 3 – Social

What people have told us

People working in education settings, particular mainstream, should make better use of things that can help people with autism, including social groups, safe spaces and break/lunchtime activities.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- create a culture change programme within our education settings that will ensure we have long-term positive education experiences for students with autism.
- develop a local education provision able to meet the growing autism population's needs.
- strengthen our long-term planning within our education settings to enable students with autism to achieve in school.

What we need to do

We need to:

- consider the individual needs of a student through the AET programme to support professionals to understand how environmental changes and adjustments to the day including support can enable that student to achieve and reach their full potential.
- support education settings via the Autism Education Trust (AET) to work with heads and senior leadership teams to identify a culture change programme, focused on early intervention and prevention, supporting student's welfare and achievement within education.

Theme 4 – Aspirations

What people have told us

People with autism should be supported to fully understand their educational pathway and how this can help them to achieve their aspirations for their adulthood.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- ensure each student's skills and strengths are identified and we support the student to identify their needs in order to reach education and life goals
- ensure there is sufficient information and guidance supporting our students through transition years, beyond education into adulthood.

What we need to do

We need to:

- increase the use of person-centred planning tools to support transition and build on strengths towards further education and employment.
- ensure our Preparing for Adulthood pathway equips young people with the appropriate skills they need to fulfil their adult life goals.
- use the AET schools and Post 16 framework to identify how we enable professionals to support a student to reflect, not just upon their needs within education but also for the future, into further education and employment.

Read more

Read all the things that we were told in Appendix A.

Priority 3 – Support independence and employment

Theme 1 – Independence

What people have told us

People with autism don't understand what support and options are available to help them to live independently.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- support people with or without autism diagnoses to build their independence.
- focus our support on achieving levels of independence which is tailored to the person's wishes and aspirations.
- make sure our community and services can efficiently support people with autism on their life journey.
- support everyone with or without an autism diagnosis through our universal offer.
- help our partner organisations to advocate for their autism community by looking at roles within their organisation.
- encourage employer organisations to work with schools and colleges so that employment opportunities/pathways are accessible.
- expand the number of autism confident employers in our borough.
- make our services and pathways clear for people with autism.

What we need to do

We need to:

- promote our specialist services and community organisations offering individualised support focused on building knowledge and independence.
- look at how we offer advice and guidance across services that support people with autism to ensure it will help build knowledge and independence, such as life skills, communication, relationships, managing finance, housing, independent living skills and employment.
- work closely with learning disability services to ensure people can access the support they need to build or maintain independence, including support into employment.

- build a skills and strengths model across organisations that supports looking at the individual before their autism.
- set up an autism ambassador group to review the online downloadable resources and leaflets to ensure the service offer and access information is clear and understood, including easy read or other formatting where required.
- support our Autism Ambassadors to identify where support for people with autism isn't clearly defined within our service offer and then identify how we can advertise this support better.
- ensure any gaps that are identified by the Autism Ambassadors are shared at the Bromley All-Age Autism Board.

Theme 2 – Opportunities

What people have told us

People with autism not in employment need better advice and support to help them find the right job for them.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- increase the number of people with autism into meaningful employment.
- celebrate and learn from successful employment of people with autism.
- share examples of good practice across employer organisations.
- promote an inclusive, workforce first approach to support culture change across workforces.
- promote clear information and guidance on the support and services on offer to our people with autism looking to build their independence, open opportunities within employment or otherwise.

What we need to do

We need to:

- support organisations to look at a strengths approach to autism specific roles and schemes through employment projects, including 100-day challenge and Bromley Autism Promise, to lead towards employment such as voluntary, apprenticeships, supported internships and graduate schemes, as well as part- or full-time employment.
- identify how we deliver partnership working with employment services to better understand and support our neurodiverse/autism community looking for work so we can make the process a positive experience.

- review where employment is working well for those people with autism to understand what support they received, where reasonable adjustments have supported the employee and how the employer supports them to remain in work.
- raise the importance of employment among strategic boards to understand the role our organisations can have and look to identify ways to deliver an employment programme which should empower employers to understand and support the employees' needs in order to meet their roles and job specification.
- use the Bromley Autism Promise to explore where there may be opportunity to build and support employment opportunities.
- work with partners to identify an opportunity to make a central autism focused hub for all services to advertise their support/offer, which could sit within the Autism Centre of Excellence offer.

Theme 3 – Adjustments

What people have told us

Employers need a better understanding of autism and the things they can put in place to support their employees with autism.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- help adults in work to know where they may turn to get support, either within their peers, in human resources or from external support, including mental health and wellbeing support.
- work with businesses to build autism awareness, which can lead to sustaining employment for its workforce with autism.
- build a greater understanding across the community of the skills and strengths of people with autism.
- build an inclusive approach to employment projects with businesses, including looking at how roles can be adapted through job carving or adjustments that support positive employment experiences.

What we need to do

We need to:

- build a training offer that supports building understanding in businesses and organisational changes and approaches to employing people with autism, including how their workforces can support their people with autism.

- grow the Bromley Autism Promise training offer to support organisations to be aware, understand difference and neurodiversity and support their autism workforce.

Read more

Read all the things that we were told in Appendix A.

Priority 4 – Reduce health and care inequalities

Theme 1 – Tailoring

What people have told us

Appointments for health and care services should be better tailored for those with autism.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- identify issues early and provide support and advice before ending up at crisis.
- support families and those with family members who have complex needs to identify adjustments needed for them to access appointments.
- look at how health appointments can be adjusted to make them inclusive for the person with autism, as well as beneficial for families to be able to confidently communicate their needs and wishes.
- support reasonable adjustments to healthcare appointments for our autism community to access timely advice and appointments.

What we need to do

We need to:

- identify, where it's appropriate within individual settings such as GP/A&E, dental etc., changes that will benefit our people with autism, such as environment changes, appointment adjustments, online offer, separate waiting areas and information and guidance available before and after health appointments.

Theme 2 – Pathways

What people have told us

Waiting times for diagnosis and specialist services are too long.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- identify how we can support our autism community to recognise and communicate when they are not able to access appointments.
- improve the waiting times for autism diagnosis, advice and guidance of diagnostic pathway and the support available throughout the process and post-diagnosis
- understand the demand on services across all-ages and the growing autism population.
- recognise the changing picture of autism diagnosis, including reports of underdiagnosis within girls.

What we need to do

We need to:

- review how we currently provide diagnostic support services, to understand how we are able to reduce waiting times for diagnosis and offer timely support interventions such a triage service.
- review current guidance around the pathway for diagnosis (all-ages), support available, the expected time frames for each process, and support or signposting upon diagnosis, including considering the clarity of information, use of easy read format, pictures, symbols etc.
- look at how we create support and interventions along service pathways to avoid a person hitting crisis - in particular young people preparing for adulthood.
- identify nationally where diagnosis processes differ, what's working well elsewhere and if replicating it locally would have a positive impact.
- look at how we develop wellbeing and mental health support alongside existing services, focused on timely support or signposting to avoid crisis - often people need to understand where support is available now rather than sit on waiting lists.

Theme 3 – Comorbidity

What people have told us

Support for children with autism and mental health difficulties needs to be improved.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- support the increased issues and service pressures around the wellbeing and mental health needs of young people preparing for adulthood and in transition years, as too many mask their issues in settings.

- train professionals to identify low level mental health concerns including those masking within education or services.
- support people of all-ages to identify what they might need, as often a person's wellbeing and mental health needs are overlooked.
- build appropriate support for mental health provision.

What we need to do

We need to:

- Identifying when they may have wellbeing needs that could impact negatively now or in the future.
- identify where wellbeing needs have significant impact on a person at stages of their life
- review the mental health support and training offer around autism, continuing to grow the knowledge of front-line professionals, education settings and services to recognise wellbeing decline, and those masking issues - in particular, those in preparing for adulthood transition years.

Read more

Read all the things that we were told in Appendix A.

Priority 5 - The right support at the right time

Theme 1 – Strengths-based

What people have told us

Support for people with autism should be better tailored to their needs, wishes and aspirations.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- help people with autism to identify their skills, strengths and their needs, including when they may have wellbeing needs that could impact negatively now or in the future.
- identify where wellbeing needs have a significant impact on a person at stages of their life.
- make sure that our services provide support to people of all-ages as and when they need it throughout their lives, that recognises and is built on individuality.
- support our services to identify those who may not be eligible for statutory support but who may run into trouble without intervention, where possible.

What we need to do

We need to:

- support people with autism to identify their skills, strengths and their needs.
- identify those who may not be eligible for statutory support but who may run into trouble without intervention, where possible.
- continue to improve signposting and guidance around interventions and where to access support for all-ages.

Theme 2 – Model

What people have told us

People with autism need better continuity from professionals and services who are working with them.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- provide information, advice and guidance including where and how this support can be assessed, as we recognise that clear information and guidance is key to support positive family environments and avoid crisis.

What we need to do

We need to:

- build, within models of health and social care services, an offer that has clear guidance and is accessible, including to those that wouldn't meet thresholds for statutory services.
- coproduce a model of early intervention support that will run across all our services, connecting and signposting to ensure we prevent a person, their family or carer entering decline and provide them access to timely support.
- look at our models of service - how do we ensure appropriate preparation for appointments, to make sure they are meaningful, and priority/action led for all involved.
- continue to build an appropriate short break offer that can meet the individual's and family or carer's needs.

Theme 3 – Influence

What people have told us

The families of people with autism need better support which is focused on helping them.

What we want to achieve

We want to:

- ensure appropriate and timely support for families and carers.
- support families to plan to avoid crisis.
- review the current ways in which health services are offered following resident engagement, to identify if there are other ways in which a service can be accessed or provided in order to make them more inclusive.

What we need to do

We need to:

- continue to work with partners through boards and engagement as a tool to change services to meet current and future wellbeing and mental health needs.
- continue engagement or use of groups and ambassadors to provide feedback on how services should provide information and guidance.
- look to advertise and where possible support family, parent and carer groups, ensuring our community can talk to others with lived experience and support each other.
- continue with our engagement with family, carers, parents and people with autism to ensure their lived experience is driving changes across all services in the Council and health, including the voluntary and public sector.
- feedback all local developments and changes to services through the delivery of the NHS long term plan into the Bromley All-Age Autism Board's action plan, to keep local people informed.
- explore through engagement with families where reasonable adjustments may be required, so we can better understand how these adjustments can be made by each service

Read more

Read all the things that we were told in Appendix A.

Appendix A – What people have told us

Priority 1 - Increase awareness and understanding

- “If you are an autistic adult without a learning disability, there is a lack of understanding across all service providers (public and private) about how your needs are different from most people.”
- “Training professionals who need to know how to respond to those with autism.”
- “More awareness and training, particularly engaging business leaders as they are responsible for creating cultures and environments.”
- “It’s the healthcare professionals, security guards, police and social workers that need to understand me and my autism.”
- “The Police were very supportive but took a long time to respond which caused a lot of anxiety.”
- “Training for police, security guards etc, on how to deal with situations where an autistic person is having issues to ensure that they don’t inadvertently make the situation worse.”
- “Often people don’t understand and think you are being difficult or strange and it’s hard to explain why a person with autism struggles sometimes with the smallest change.”
- “Expecting that people with autism can easily travel etc, I think other methods should routinely be offered such as video call or telephone calls.”
- “We are not supported by our community; we don’t have a clear understanding of the support and resources available.”
- “We need to improve education of autism, inform people, help them understand.”
- “I don’t understand what I need, someone needs to help me identify my needs and advise me what support I could receive.”
- “I struggle with lots of text, a lot of my autistic friends do to. We need consideration for easy read and bullet pointed text to make it easier to read and understand.”
- “Housing is a massive issue for people with mental health or autism, where’s the support for higher functioning autistic people to help understand.”
- “Few professionals have understanding how adjustments are needed for some people with autism.”
- “As a professional working with neurodiverse young people, I feel I have a duty to provide an environment that is neurodiverse aware and inclusive. For all workers to have positive training.”
- “The social workers could change/ leave and move at difficult times e.g., just before going to the Panel for approval, for a placement or completing the information for panel.”
- “Some social workers are living out of the area or move on from cases quickly and have no knowledge or experience of local placements suitable to meet complex needs.”
- “Ensure that anyone offering any kind of service - shops, schools, hospitals, transport, police, Bromley Council - all have proper training on autism...especially adults with autism.”

- “Bromley Recovery College (offers workshops and courses which enable students to achieve a greater insight into their own mental wellbeing) – we need to get more out there so we can learn more.”
- “I need help understanding how my autism impacts on me compared to neurotypical people.”
- “More awareness of neurodiversity among older people and those without a diagnosis.”
- “I think families should all be informed about different kinds of neurodiversity and not just the families affected.”

Priority 2 - Build sustainable education placements

- “There should be some understanding of neurodiverse presentation, there might be some severe areas of difficulty often not supported.”
- “More staff training in education settings.”
- “Earlier observation by professionals in schools.”
- “Work more closely with schools to signpost resources and support.”
- “Schools truly understanding what is required and not being scared to do the right thing by individuals.”
- “Schools work very well with people with autism.”
- “Support for families whose child is presenting with a PDA profile who experiences issues accessing their education.”
- “No support for me whilst I was studying for my degree. I wanted to learn about people so that I could get on better. This is where I discovered that I had autism.”
- “More educating children of their autism from at least the age of 7.”
- “Someone to talk & somewhere to go in school breaks means anxiety is significantly lowered.”
- “The awareness and openness of staff can and has made a positive education experience.”
- “The school offer support and social groups, children can feel understood, safe and achieve.”
- “Education is key - people have religious education yet we learn nothing about disabilities and autism - we need to understand it’s impact on individuals, education and their families.”
- “Autism doesn’t need to be recognised by a diagnosis. So many students are struggling with autism or neurodiverse conditions, this will only increase as we understand more about autism.”
- “I struggled with depression for a short time in secondary school, the doctor just thought my autism is the reason for not being liked. We need more understanding and guidance from these professionals.”
- “When diagnosed we need support groups for mainstream education settings that support understanding of communication, social skills, friendships etc.”
- “More early intervention prior to diagnosis - more training of boys and girls masking at school.”
- “Teachers tried to limit my aspirations. I had no structure or guide preparing me so that once out of education I knew what to do with my life.”

Priority 3 – Support independence and employment

- “Living in social housing has impacted on my mental health. I am high functioning and living independently but wish that the services I work with could be more understanding of my individual need.”
- “Support throughout school enabled my child to achieve their goals, move onto higher education and gain their chosen job.”
- “Job centre experience was awful. It was overwhelming with too many sensory issues.”
- “Everyone with Autism is different- if you employ people on the spectrum, it will help others with Autism feel supported, whilst growing understanding in the workforce.”
- “Diversity and inclusion for Neuro diverse adults in the workplace to be included in solving the problem.”
- “Ensure sufficient educational support and job opportunities.”
- “We need to get employers to really define Reasonable adjustments for people with disability or Autism.”
- “Employer who has taken the time and initiative to research Autism and what an Autistic person might need, then speaking with the individual to ensure everything is appropriately put in to place for them to achieve and carry out their role.”
- “Continuing support once in work e.g., meetings, someone to talk to about issues, someone to guide clearly on what to do.”
- “Adjustments should be for the individual, not generic.”
- “Due to the lack of understanding in many 'normal' workplaces, they have been unable to sustain employment, something they very much want to be able to do.”
- “The Jobcentre Plus (JCP) seem very confused about their approach, providing Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES) - which is meant to be intensive employment support, but contact once a month by phone. This isn't supportive, the types of appointments need to be flexible without threats of sanctions (losing benefits).”
- “I used to have a job, I worked on areas outside my Job description, I wasn't paid well, I ended up having mental health issues for two and half years, I lost confidence, now I need more support to build confidence and get back to work.”
- “I've had support given to find job but nothing after, there can be issues in work and it can be hard to keep a job sometimes.”
- “I don't understand about housing types, benefits, and money, I need support.”
- “Maybe having a generalised system, a main online source for Autism across the borough- information/website/all links for services/ social media/ Apps.”
- “Any advertisements, events or services need to use inclusive pictures, symbols and easy read text particularly in Local authority papers/newsletters.”

Priority 4 – Reduce health and care inequalities

- “In my experience there are no specialists who can help, unless you are prepared for a 2-year waiting list. System is discriminatory for those that have autism along with other conditions.”
- “If there is a 3-month list for those with mental health, this should be the same for those with autism and mental health issues. Good looks like equality.”
- “Ensuring that the local community paediatric service offer a sensitive approach to assessment, where parents are not expected to speak in front of their child about their difficulties, if they don't feel this is helpful.”
- “Services understanding how the presentation of girls on the spectrum can be vastly different to boys and many difficulties masked, so they become extremely vulnerable to internalising and having mental health difficulties. A diagnosis for these children can be extremely important.”
- “I don't understand the Support through the diagnostic pathway.”
- “Bromley Y and CAMHS waiting lists are too long to cope with the huge influx of need since Covid. More triage services needed.”
- “If would have been nice to not feel neglected once I turned 18.”
- “We want choice to group our appointments together or have them all separate.”
- “Don't book appointment's during school or time's when I have routine, they need to ask me, it can mess me up for days.”
- “Awareness training for GP and health service receptionists, I feel a lack of patience and understanding can make me more anxious, I can't get support when I'm unable to manage my anxiety.”
- “Separate area in GP surgeries and hospital waiting rooms for people with autism. On sensory level, building of anxiety, difficulty waiting or simply the whole situation can be daunting.”
- “It's very difficult to access services as my child was told they would need to attend, which can be extremely difficult.”
- “Please can we consider home appointments if the person is non-verbal with very high communication difficulties and support needs. Sometimes getting to appointments is impossible and health risks can be missed.”

Priority 5 - The right support at the right time

- “The world would be a different place without people with autism. But a lack of support for those with autism, we need to recognise that there are different groups of people with very different needs.”
- “We should be focusing on the person at the time and not in the past. Assessments should focus on the present and future and what that person needs to get there.”
- “When diagnosed later as adult which happens a lot, we need support in varying areas including social skills and how to keep job.”
- “I've had a positive experience of Young Offender's Service (YOS), generally very understanding.”

- “I’ve sensory issues and not understanding my needs and what support I need. More sensory classes and awareness even for adults and those high functioning.”
- “In terms of mental health services - having autism is a barrier - if you present with autism and a co-morbid mental health issue - no one will help you.”
- “I had some bad experiences with my son and mental health services. Professionals are all lovely and helpful but if a person is autistic, they do not have the resources available to them, to help. We had to go to private services to get the help needed.”
- “Important that person with complex needs would benefit from the continuity of the same people throughout the transition processes and into the first 6 months in a setting.”
- “It’s easier having one person to support me than many in one go (like a carer, Social Worker, advocate, or Health professional).”
- “We had so many social workers, it was a very difficult transition. My son was 18/19 years. Continuity would have made so much difference.”
- “Where does autism fit? - if you don't have a learning disability lots of services can't help you. I get help with other issues - but not the autism element.”
- “Later in life or when young, we need support learning about autism. We need social skill groups, money groups, assistance into work groups, anxiety groups, support groups.”
- “We need continuing help like in mental health services; autism just isn’t understood.”
- “I live alone, have no support but need weekly support with my autism.”
- “As a carer I feel like the professional hasn't read the notes. Then don't feel like we get what we need from a meeting.”
- “Need for short breaks, our parents and siblings sometimes need this, it provides healthy time apart as well as build independence for our loved ones away from home environment.”
- “Any support has had to be fought for.”
- “Assessing effective family support across the borough and what that looks like.”
- “The whole process of supporting family through school into adulthood puts a lot of pressure on families, we need support for parents and siblings.”
- “Counselling for families including siblings.”
- “Bromley Parent Voice have been very supportive.”
- “Support for parents so they aren't so overwhelmed.”
- “Signposting is really required. From what procedure the diagnosis will follow to what special facilities there are for children by age group. There are so many gaps, which causes anxiety for the parent.”

Appendix B - Useful resources

The law (Legislation and Statutory Guidance)

- [The Care Act 2014](#)
- [The Children and Families Act 2014](#)
- [The Equality Act 2010](#)
- [The Autism Act 2009](#)
- [Statutory guidance for local authorities and NHS organisations to support implementation of the adult autism strategy](#)
- [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years](#)

National strategies and policies

- [National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026](#) (published 2021)
- [Autism strategy implementation plan: 2021 to 2022 \(Annex A\)](#) (published 2021)
- [NHS Long Term Plan: Learning disability and autism](#) (published 2019)
- [Think Autism](#) (published 2014)
- [Fulfilling and Rewarding lives: the strategy for adults with Autism in England](#) (published 2010)

National resources and research

- [Office of National Statistics: Outcomes for disabled people in the UK](#) (published 2021)
- [Local Government Association: Housing Sensory needs considering and meeting the sensory needs of autistic people in housing](#) (published 2020)
- [Left Stranded: The impact of coronavirus on autistic people and their families in the UK](#) (published 2020)
- [The Autism Act, 10 Years On: A report from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism on understanding, services and support for autistic people and their families in England](#) (published 2019)
- [The Autism Self-Assessment Framework](#) (published 2016)
- [NICE guidance and quality standards: Autism](#)
- [National Autistic Society](#)

Local resources (strategies, policies and research)

- [Our Journey to Excellence: SEND Vision and Priorities for 2019 to 2022](#)
- [The NHS South East All-Age Autism Strategy for 2021 to 2026](#)

- [Making Bromley Even Better, the Council's corporate strategy for 2021 to 2031](#)
- [Better Together: SEND engagement framework](#)
- [Tackling Loneliness: A strategy for Bromley 2022 to 2026](#)
- [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Bromley](#)
- [Autism Care Pathway in Bromley 18+: A report by Healthwatch Bromley](#)

Appendix C - Timeline of national Autism legislation and policies

- 2009 – [The Autism Act 2009](#) guaranteed the rights of autistic adults in England.
- 2010 – The Autism Act 2009 led to the first national autism strategy, called '[Fulfilling and Rewarding lives: the strategy for adults with Autism in England](#)'.
- 2010 – The Government published '[Statutory guidance for local authorities and NHS organisations to support implementation of the autism strategy](#)'.
- 2014 – A review of the Autism Act 2009 led to an update of the strategy, called '[Think Autism](#)'
- 2015 – The Government published '[Statutory guidance for local authorities and NHS organisations to support implementation of the adult autism strategy](#)'.
- 2016 – Public Health England published '[The Autism Self-Assessment Framework](#)' to help local authorities to self-assess their implementation of the Adult Autism strategy locally.
- 2019 – Autism was included as a priority in [NHS England's Long-Term Plan](#) to make sure that NHS England plans how to provide better healthcare for autistic people.
- 2019 – The Department of Health and Social Care committed to refreshing the 'Think Autism' strategy and extend scope to all-ages as part of a '[Review of the National Autism Strategy 'Think Autism': call for evidence](#)'.
- 2021 – Leading on from NHS England's Long-Term Plan, the [NHS South East All-Age Autism Strategy for 2021 to 2026](#) was produced in regional collaboration to define the priorities for the next five years for the NHS in the south east.
- 2021 – The [National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 2026](#) was published, supported by an additional plan which outlines the first two years for implementation (2021 to 2022).

Appendix D - Impact of COVID-19

We've produced this strategy at a time when the world is moving from a global pandemic to an endemic and where the lives of people living in the UK have been adversely affected and changed.

As we transition into the 'new normal', we have to consider and remember the impact of this pandemic on our children and adults with autism, their families and carers, and our professionals.

Throughout the pandemic we've seen increased concerns and issues with some of the population's wellbeing and mental health. We also saw changes to the life circumstances of individuals across our borough due to a lack of support networks or, sadly, due to loss of life to family or friends.

We know that some people have found social distancing and a reduction in interaction extremely welcoming. Therefore, they have embraced the new way of living where society has become digitally ready, which makes some interaction a more positive experience, with flexibility to have meetings at suitable times.

Those travelling to employment or education settings, coupled with the social pressures and sensory environments, have found the pandemic has had a positive impact upon them individually due to the nature of their work or studies being online, from their safe home environment. Some have reported this as the happiest and most productive they have been in years.

Some people have found access to particular services difficult, particularly health services, due to the impact of the pandemic and the limiting of access to health professionals at this time.

Whilst we're witnessing and anticipating increased need for services and support locally, both short- and long-term planning and intervention is required. The effects of the pandemic will be felt across our society for many years to come. Some of this impact is currently unknown and it may be difficult to identify and capture the ongoing needs in this strategy at this time. However, this strategy reflects the adjustments potentially required in support and services for the next five years.

We recognise that engagement is key to continue our strategy developments locally. We will continue to build throughout the life of the strategy and hope to involve more people as we review our progress and as our action plan evolves.