

New landmark strategy to improve the lives of autistic people

- The Autism Strategy aims to tackle the inequalities and barriers autistic people face so they can live independent and fulfilled lives
- Faster diagnoses and better access to health and social care for autistic people of all ages
- Commitments will support better education tailored to the needs of autistic children and young people

Improving the lives of autistic people is the focus of a new multi-million pound strategy launched by the government today.

Backed by nearly £75 million in the first year, it aims to speed up diagnosis and improve support and care for autistic people. The funding includes £40 million through the NHS Long Term Plan to improve capacity in crisis services and support children with complex needs in inpatient care.

Autistic people face multiple disadvantages throughout their lives, with too many struggling to get support that is tailored to their needs at an early enough stage and facing stigma and misunderstanding, often leaving them lonely or isolated. Through this new strategy, steps will be taken to improve diagnosis, which is crucial to help people get the support they need, and improve society's understanding of autism.

The five year strategy was developed following engagement with autistic people, their family and carers. It will support autistic children and adults through better access to education, more help to get into work, preventing avoidable admissions to healthcare settings, and training for prison staff to better support prisoners with complex needs.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Sajid Javid said:

Improving the lives of autistic people is a priority and this new strategy, backed by almost £75 million in the first year, will help us create a society that truly understands and includes autistic people in all aspects of life. It will reduce diagnosis waiting times for children and adults and improve community support for autistic people. This is crucial in reducing the health inequalities they face, and the unacceptable life expectancy gap that exists today.

Minister for Care, Helen Whately said:

Far too many autistic people still struggle to get the support they need in childhood, and as adults – and this is often exacerbated by not getting a timely diagnosis.

This landmark strategy will help give autistic people equal opportunities to flourish in their communities as well as better access to the support they need throughout their lives.

Minister for Children and Families, Vicky Ford said:

Many people who have autism face unacceptable barriers in every aspect of their lives – in health, employment and still too often in their education. I'm proud that the new Autism Strategy will, for the first time ever, also consider how to better support autistic children and young people's access to education.

A huge part of how we can address the inequalities that these children and young people face is by increasing our awareness and understanding of their needs, and tailoring the support available to them. Working closely with the healthcare services, we can level up outcomes for autistic young people in generations to come.

There are approximately 700,000 autistic people in the UK and a large number experience health inequalities during their lives.

The life expectancy gap for autistic people is approximately 16 years on average compared to the general population and almost 80% of autistic adults experience mental health problems during their lifetime.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges many autistic people already face, such as loneliness and social isolation, and anxiety.

This new strategy has been developed with the views and experiences of autistic people provided in response to the government's call for evidence in 2019. The strategy will run until 2026 and aims to:

- Improve understanding and acceptance of autism within society: Developing and testing an initiative to improve the public's understanding of autistic people – both the strengths and positives as well as the challenges, working with autistic people, their families and the voluntary sector. This will help people recognise the diversity of the autistic community; that every autistic person is different. It includes improving understanding of the strengths and positives of being autistic, as well as the challenges people might face in their daily lives and how distressed behaviour can manifest itself.
- Strengthen access to education and support positive transitions into adulthood: Testing and expanding a school-based identification programme based on a pilot in Bradford from 10 to over 100 schools over the next three years. Early findings from the pilot show children are being identified earlier and getting support quicker.
- Support more autistic people into employment: Improving the accessibility of job centres for autistic people, to get them the right help to find jobs or employment programmes.
- Tackle health and care inequalities: Providing £13 million of funding to

reduce diagnosis waiting times and increase availability of post-diagnostic support for children and adults, and address backlogs of people waiting made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Build the right support in the community and supporting people in inpatient care: Providing £40 million as part of the NHS Long Term Plan to improve community support and prevent avoidable admissions of autistic people and those with a learning disability, and £18.5 million to prevent crises and improve the quality of inpatient mental health settings.
- Improve support within the criminal and youth justice systems: Reviewing findings from the Call for Evidence on neurodiversity, and developing a toolkit to educate frontline staff about this, and the additional support people might need

Early identification can play an important role in enabling children and young people to get timely support, which is crucial in preventing escalation of needs.

While autism is not a learning disability, around 4 in 10 autistic people have a learning disability.

Some autistic people will need very little or no support in their everyday lives while others may need high levels of care, such as 24-hour support in residential care.

Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive of the National Autistic Society said:

We and our supporters have long campaigned for a fully-funded public understanding campaign, significant investment in reducing diagnosis waiting times and better post-diagnostic support. No-one should feel judged for being autistic, or to have to wait many months for a potentially life changing diagnosis and vital help and support.

We're really pleased to see concrete actions to tackle this in the first year of the new strategy, alongside other important commitments. The following four years will be just as vital. It's crucial that the Government invest in autistic people, and finally create a society that really works for autistic children, adults and their families.

Nellie Allsop, autistic woman and campaigner said:

I'm extremely happy to see the launch of the strategy.

Having been diagnosed last year, age 25, I'm still yet to tell people close to me that I'm autistic, for worry that they won't quite 'get it'. That's why I'm delighted to hear that this strategy aims to improve the understanding and acceptance of autism amongst the general public.

I'm also pleased it will include plans to build the right mental health support in the community for autistic people. As someone who avoided a hospital admission thanks to the work of an NHS crisis team, I've experienced first-hand the benefits of good mental health support in the community. Nevertheless, more does need to be done to improve community support and understanding of autism within all community mental health teams – something I hope this strategy will address.

This strategy will align with wider government work through the National Disability Strategy and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) review. The government will ensure issues relevant to autistic people are considered as part of these programmes of work.

This strategy's accompanying implementation plan will lay the foundations in the first year, for what the government aims to achieve over the course of the next five years. It will be refreshed in subsequent years, in line with future Spending Reviews.

Background information

- £74.88 million will be given as part of the first year of the strategy. This includes:
- £40 million through NHS Long Term Plan
- Investing £25 million into building the capacity and capability of seven-day specialist multidisciplinary and crisis services supporting autistic people and those with a learning disability
- Investing £15 million in keyworker pilots and early adopter sites to support children with the most complex needs in inpatient mental health settings, as well as those at risk of being admitted to these settings.
- This is in addition to the £2.5 million from the Long Term Plan for CYP autism diagnosis.
- £31 million through Mental Health recovery action plan to tackle inequalities and build the right support in the community
- £600,000 to fund training for staff in early years settings, schools and colleges, to improve the experience of autistic children in the education system and prepare them for adulthood.
- £600,000 for the extension of the early identification programme developed in Bradford
- £180,000 for the understanding autism campaign